

Five O'clock Surgeon

Young Doctor Stephen Lovett had planned his career carefully. He intended to avoid the demanding life of the practising surgeon in favour of a well-regulated job with one of the large clinics. His day would be an orderly routine, leaving him leisure for research. He was going to be a "Five o'clock surgeon". Besides, he was engaged to the beautiful Leslie Townsend, niece to the head of the Denton Clinic, and she could be an invaluable aid to his success.

But things did not work out quite as he anticipated. He had not counted on the lovely nurse, Julie Greenwood, who believed so ardently that a doctor's first responsibility was to the ills of all humanity. How his choice was made is a warm and tender love story laid against the background of a modern hospital.

by the same author

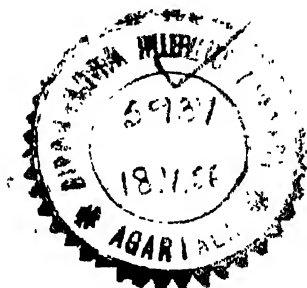
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DOCTOR WHITNEY'S SECRETARY

DOCTORS ARE DIFFERENT

Five O'clock Surgeon

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CHAPTER I

The surgical resident at the Springville Hospital tightened his grip on a retractor and made a quick mental calculation.

The appendectomy at which he was assisting had got under way at 4:20 p.m. Barring the unexpected, thought Steve, he would be out of the operating room in ample time to keep his appointment with Leslie.

It was his evening on.

Leslie was picking him up at the hospital at five to take him to a cocktail party being given by her uncle, Dr. Denton, head of the Denton Clinic. For Steve, it was no ordinary social function. In two months his residency here would be at an end and his plans for the future included a place, if possible, on the staff of the Denton Clinic.

He would be lucky if he got in, he thought.

Though not as large or celebrated as the Lahey in Boston or the Mayo in Minnesota, the Denton Clinic had a high rating.

He went on thinking about it, then all at once Dr. Sylvester spoke.

"This is an ovarian cyst, gentlemen," the surgeon said.

The "gentlemen" included, besides Steve, Vincent Rhead, assistant resident; Zeller, the anaesthetist; and a third year medical student named Houghton who had come into the room a few minutes before.

Steve nodded, realizing this would prolong the operation and that Leslie would have to wait for him. Well, there was nothing he could do about it. He wasn't yet a five o'clock surgeon with regular working hours.

He straightened slightly and spoke to the nurse running the instrument table.

"A large retractor, please."

It was in his gloved palm almost before the words were out of his mouth. He flashed a glance of appreciation at the girl who had so quickly anticipated his need. She was new. It was her

first day here, and she had been kept so busy that he had not yet seen her minus gown, cap and mask.

She was slender, he noted, and of medium height. He liked the little he could see of her face—the two dark, hyphen-straight brows, the thick brown eyelashes, the bridge of a straight nose—but it was the way she attended to business that particularly pleased him. She was the sort of scrub nurse a surgeon dreams about, he thought, but seldom is fortunate enough to work with. Her manner was quiet and unobtrusive; she didn't chatter like some of the nurses; she was so absorbed in the operation that you had a feeling she could step in, if necessary, and help the surgeon do the job.

Dr. Sylvester enlarged the incision.

He was the chief of the surgical staff; a tall man over sixty, grey-haired, with a quiet, authoritative manner. He was highly respected for his genius with the knife. This, with his unselfish desire to help younger men get ahead, had made the Springville Hospital widely known as an excellent teaching institution.

Steve revered John Sylvester.

The operation proceeded smoothly. The patient, having had spinal anaesthesia, was conscious. She was a pretty young woman. Completely unaware of the complication the surgeon had encountered, she was gazing up dreamily at the bright light above her.

"I can see," she told the anaesthetist in a pleased, childlike voice.

"Yes, you can see," replied Johann Zeller, soothingly. He was an Austrian and spoke with a marked accent.

"But I don't feel anything," the childlike voice said happily.

"Good."

Zeller nodded but he did not smile. He seldom smiled, reflected Steve. He was about forty-five. He had dark, thinning hair above a still, white face. He had been in America for two years, and a few months ago Dr. Sylvester had been instrumental in getting him the position of resident anaesthetist.

"What is her pulse?" inquired the surgeon.

"One hundred, doctor."

"Blood pressure?"

"One eighteen."

The anaesthetist was sitting on a low stool at the patient's head. With his right hand he touched the skin of her face experimentally. He had strange, limp-looking hands. He had been a surgeon of note in his own country, Steve remembered, until the Nazis had decided to use him to do inhuman tests on concentration camp victims. Zeller refused. As a consequence they had broken his hands, ending his surgical career.

The surgeon was placing two Kelley snaps, one beside the other, on the pedicle of the cyst. He cut between them and began to excise the cyst.

"Bring a basin," Steve said to the operating room supervisor.

She murmured an apology as she came to the table with it. She was getting married in a few days and was understandably absent-minded.

A few minutes later, after the cystectomy was completed and the surgeon was suturing the pedicle, a voice came through the loud-speaker outside the operating room.

"Dr. Lovett, Dr. Lovett."

Steve looked at Houghton.

"Take it for me, will you?"

The medical student left the room.

Who could be paging him, wondered Steve. Had Mrs. Gillette in 201 had a bad turn? He had helped do a major on her two days ago. Though her pulse and temperature were slightly elevated, her general condition was good, and he had felt no alarm until this moment. He liked Mrs. Gillette. She was one of the most co-operative patients he had ever had.

And she had six fine children.

Houghton re-entered.

"It was a Miss Townsend, Dr. Lovett. She wanted to remind you that she's waiting downstairs."

There was a moment's complete silence, then Vincent Rhead laughed softly.

Behind his mask Steve felt his face grow hot. Leslie must realize he would be down as soon as he could. Why must she

embarrass him before all these people, especially Dr. Sylvester, his chief? Did she think he enjoyed the sensation of being yanked at like a pet poodle on the end of a leash?

He wondered what the others were thinking.

Vincent Rhead, of course, was enjoying himself. Steve expected that. He glanced across the table at Vin. Vin was twenty-eight, one year younger than Steve, a handsome man in the darkly romantic way that especially appealed to women. He was piqued because Leslie had lately shown a preference for Steve. In Burma, during the war, the three had formed a friendly triumvirate, Steve and Vin being with the same hospital unit while Leslie was doing a great job driving a Red Cross ambulance.

It had seemed nothing less than a miracle that they were all from Springville, and Leslie had lightly declared herself in love with both the young men. Until the end of the war she had treated them impartially. Then Steve and Vin had come back to the Springville Hospital to finish residencies interrupted early in 1943. Leslie stayed abroad. When she finally returned in the autumn of '46, she was apparently too busy renewing friendships within her own social circle to look the two young doctors up.

In January they finally met, but Leslie, at that time, was going out quite steadily with Richard Kane, a surgeon on the staff of her uncle's clinic, and Steve did not consider that either he or Vin had a chance. Now in October he and Leslie knew they were seriously in love.

Vin knew it too, and it burned him up.

There was silence in the room while Dr. Sylvester went on operating. At last he straightened and addressed Steve.

"Will you sew up?"

"Yes, sir."

It was a compliment and Steve stepped quickly around the table to take the place vacated by his superior. As he did so, it flashed through his mind that this might also be in the nature of a small test. Though there had been nothing in Dr. Sylvester's calm blue gaze to indicate such a thing, he had heard Leslie's

message, and it was his outspoken belief that no man could serve two masters.

Medicine was John Sylvester's life, reflected Steve, as the spare, erect figure of the older man moved out of sight.

Was it the chief's intention to find out how much medicine meant to his resident?

Was he curious to discover whether or not the man he had been so generous to would resent a further delay in his personal plans?

Steve held out his hand.

"Catgut and curved."

The new nurse had it ready for him.

Again her promptness gratified his sense of good surgical team work. He began to put in careful stitches.

"What'd you let Old Silly hold you up for, Steve?" demanded Vin.

"Old Silly," was the chief's nickname. Ordinarily, it was applied in an indulgent, affectionate way to a man who had steadily refused to compromise with his ideals and whose integrity, in a world of shifting values, was a byword in the hospital. But on Vin's lips it had a mocking sound. Vin readily admitted Dr. Sylvester's skill, but he resented the fact that a man that age continued to practise. "Where do we come in?" he had once demanded of Steve. "Old Silly's made his pile. Why doesn't he step aside?"

Steve knew that Vin was now trying to get a rise out of him. He said nothing.

Zeller remarked, "It is splendid to be so trusted."

Houghton moved his feet nervously, murmuring, "Sometimes I wonder whether I'll ever get any closer to an operation than I am right now."

"Sure you will," said Steve encouragingly.

"Just looking on gives me a queer feeling," admitted the student doubtfully.

"You'll get over that," Steve said.

"I hope so. I'd hate to keel over."

Vin let out a scornful laugh. "There's nothing to it. A layman could operate after watching a few times."

"Not on me," announced Steve.

"Nor on me," echoed Zeller, shaking his head gravely.

Some minutes later, when Steve was suturing the skin and nearly finished with the operation, the loud-speaker blared forth once more.

"Dr. Lovett, Dr. Lovett."

Leslie again, thought Steve, biting his lip in annoyance.

"Shall I take the message?" asked Houghton.

"Yes."

Houghton went out.

"She's getting impatient, isn't she?" remarked Vin. "You ought to have Leslie better trained than that, Steve."

The sponge nurse and the room supervisor giggled in unison, but Steve made note of the fact that the girl standing beside him, so intent on what his fingers were doing, neither raised her eyes nor smiled.

His liking for her increased.

Presently, Houghton reappeared, grinning.

"Miss Townsend wants to remind you that the cocktail party starts at five-thirty and it's almost that now," he recited, parrot-like.

"I'm glad I'm not in your shoes, Steve," remarked Vin.

That's just where Vin would like to be, thought Steve. He looked up quickly, meeting the dark gaze. Vin was an odd chap, he reflected, a French-Canadian with a background of extreme poverty. He exuded charm and showed the world an easy, cocksure manner, but he had the grasping egotism that went with a sense of insecurity.

Vin lowered his eyes.

"Why don't you run along?" he asked amiably. "I'll put the dressing on."

"No, thanks, I'll finish."

"Afraid somebody'll squeal on you?"

"Not at all," said Steve pleasantly.

He had learned that the best way to handle Vin was to ignore

his poisoned arrows and his sarcasm. As a consequence, they got along well together in their work.

When Steve was through he stepped away from the table, stripping off gloves and mask, glad to be rid of both. Now he was free to change his clothes and join Leslie, but he lingered in the corridor, wanting to say a word of welcome to the new nurse who had given him such able assistance.

He could see her from where he stood.

She was picking up the instruments remaining on her table. The supervisor was straightening the room. Zeller had pushed his stool back from the table and was standing up by the anaesthesia machine. Vin and an orderly were wrapping the patient in a blanket before transferring her from the table to a stretcher on wheels.

Steve lit a cigarette and waited.

A moment later, they brought the patient from the operating room. Vin was walking along beside her, holding her hand. He winked at Steve as he passed.

The procession moved down the corridor and out of sight.

The girl Steve was waiting for came out of the operating room. She was minus cap and mask. Without them, she looked very young and very tired.

Steve advanced, smiling.

"Hello. Are you all in?"

She was looking down when he spoke. Her thick, curling lashes lifted quickly and he received a direct glance from a pair of clear brown eyes.

"Oh, it's not that bad, Dr. Lovett."

She had a dimple in her left cheek which showed itself for just an instant.

"You're a wonder with instruments," he said.

"Why, thank you," she replied gratefully.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Julie Greenwood."

"You like operating room duty, don't you?"

"Oh yes," she said, "I prefer it."

"We're lucky to have you," Steve declared. He lounged

beside her, one hand in his pocket. He was tall with broad shoulders and friendly grey eyes under sandy brows. His light hair had a suggestion of red in it.

"I consider myself fortunate to be here," Julie was saying. He liked her quiet voice, her easy, natural manner. She had smooth brown hair parted cleanly in the middle and drawn down over the tops of her small, close-set ears, into a little knot at the nape of her neck. "There's everything to work with," she went on enthusiastically, "it's a joy to be able to pick out any kind of a kit one wants."

He watched her fingering a seam of her gown. She had small, capable-looking hands with clean, shapely nails.

"Surgery fascinates me," she confided. "I like to feel that I'm in on the miracles you men perform."

"Sometimes . . ." began Steve.

"I know," she interrupted quickly, "operations don't always go right, but the majority of them do, and I like being part of the picture."

"You're an important part, Julie."

They smiled at each other.

"Where do you come from?" Steve asked.

"Maine."

"What part?"

"Brownfield."

"Well!" He thrust out his hand. "We're neighbours. My mother lives near Fryeburg Village."

"Imagine that?" laughed Julie.

They were shaking hands when Vin suddenly appeared. He came silently, on rubber-soled shoes, and neither Steve nor Julie heard him until he was beside them.

"Pardon the intrusion," he murmured.

Before the knowing look in his eyes their clasped hands fell quickly apart. Steve could think of nothing to say, and Julie was correspondingly silent, but Vin was voluble enough.

"Why waste your time on Steve?" he asked Julie, looking her over appraisingly. "He's spoken for, you know. Now with me you have a clear field." With his indifference to appearances,

Vin slipped his arm around Julie's slim waist and pulled her close to him. "You and I can have a lot of fun together," he murmured, close to her ear.

Though the colour rushed up into Julie's face, she retained her poise. Without comment, she freed herself and walked composedly away.

With a laugh Vin ran his hands over his curly hair. He had thin-fingered nervous hands that were never still for long. It seemed to Steve as if they were always reaching out towards someone or something, locking or unlocking, touching Vin's hair, face or necktie. Often Vin flung them out in dramatic gestures and sometimes, for a moment or two, they covered his eyes as if he hated the sight of his fellow-men.

"Playing hard to get, isn't she?" Vin said.

"Leave her alone," Steve warned.

He said it quietly but he meant the words.

He was thinking of Burma.

It was in a makeshift hospital on the Burma border at the foot of the Humer that Steve had had a run-in with Vin over a woman. Vin was hounding a pretty little Burmese nurse. She wanted to be left alone but Vin, with his consummate conceit, kept after her until finally she came crying to Steve.

Vin was doing excellent work—almost heroic at times—and to report him to the authorities might have resulted in his dismissal. He was needed, so one day when they were out together bombing catfish, Steve settled it in his own way.

He said pleasantly, "No bones were broken the last time, Vin, but that's no guarantee for the future."

"Oh," Vin said, "so you've got a little yen for her yourself?"

Steve felt his anger slowly rising. He held in with an effort, saying, "She's a nice girl. I wouldn't want to see her molested."

Vin laughed.

"Brother, you're all off. She likes me, that was just a come-on."

They parted, and Steve strode towards an elevator, his intention being to take it up to the third floor where he and Rhead

shared a room. His mind was on Leslie now. He shouldn't have stood there talking so long.

He jabbed the elevator button with an impatient thumb.

The machine was slow, and he decided to use the stairs. His sense of guilt was increasing. If Leslie bawled him out he'd take it like a lamb, he decided.

He passed through a swinging door and took the stairs, two at a time. On the third floor, rounding a corner, he all but collided with a nurses' aid emerging from one of the diet kitchens with a tray. Her name was Mrs. Wetherill. She was a middle-aged woman with a slight limp, one of the most conscientious people in the hospital.

"Who's getting the snack?" he asked.

"I scrambled an egg for Dr. Wilson," Mrs. Wetherill said. "The poor old man didn't eat a mite of lunch. He's been too busy teaching his classes. He imagines the wall opposite his bed is a blackboard, Dr. Lovett." The nurses' aid shook her head and sighed. "He keeps threatening to leave if somebody doesn't crase it for him." Her deep-circled eyes grew moist. "Will it be much longer?" she murmured.

Steve patted her shoulder.

"No."

She went on with her tray, and Steve continued to his room.

It was a large room on a south-west corner. There were four windows curtained in limp white scrim. Two looked out towards the nurses' home, a sprawling yellow building with a flat roof; the other two faced a patch of woods through which a brook ran.

There were two white enamel beds with a table between, on which a telephone stood; two plain oak bureaus, several chairs, and a nondescript rug.

Steve stripped and went into the bathroom. Under the shower, he thought again about Julie. He didn't want to bother her unnecessarily and yet, when he remembered the look on Vin's face, he had a feeling that Julie ought to be put a little on her guard.

Perhaps, though, he was too much concerned about it. She had shown that she could take care of herself—she would be far more clever about it than that little Burmese nurse—but Vin was an unusual man. He resented indifference on the part of the opposite sex. He seemed to consider it an insult. As a result, it made him vindictive. He had, for instance, discontinued his attentions to the Burmese nurse, but he had systematically turned her fellow-workers against her.

Should Julie be warned or not?

Steve was still debating the matter when he went downstairs.

CHAPTER II

“Well, Steve,” Leslie’s voice was cool and distant, “so you finally arrived?” She was sitting in a leather-covered chair by one of the waiting-room windows. “I was beginning to think you’d forgotten my existence.”

There were several people seated nearby. Uncomfortably conscious of listening ears, Steve murmured an apology, then asked, “How are you, Leslie?”

He had never seen her look more stunning. She was tall and slender with a glowing, sun-tanned skin, pale golden hair, and eyes that were a mixture of blue and violet. She was wearing a tailored grey wool suit with a draped turban of the same material intricately stitched in silver thread.

With one quick graceful movement she was on her feet.

“I’m fine, Steve, and I like nothing better than waiting around for people, especially in hospitals!”

Her tone was light, but he saw a flash of anger in her eyes. She was looking at him so accusingly that he realized it was more than his tardiness that had upset her.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked anxiously.

Leslie studied his face for a moment, then drew herself up

with a little laugh. She was twenty-four but looked older, having moved at a fast pace all her life.

"Don't play innocent, Steve." There was a magnificent neckpiece of two fox pelts lying across the arm of the chair in which she had been sitting. She picked it up and flung it over her shoulders. "Come on. Let's get out of this gruesome place."

Gruesome? He frowned, not liking the word as applied to the place where he had come into stature as a surgeon. Leslie had the wrong idea about hospitals. To be sure, they were institutions for the ill, but didn't she realize that often sick people were happy whereas healthy people were miserable? He admitted pain and tears—sometimes even black despair—within these walls, but on the other hand there was hope and courage and even laughter to take the edge off pain.

Yes, and as Julie had pointed out, miracles occasionally.

Leslie, who had been watching his expression, laughed impatiently.

"How long must we stand here, Steve?"

They went out into an amethystine twilight. It was the first of the month, and as yet there had been no frost but the air was cool and bracing, and Steve breathed it in deeply. He was a nature lover and he hoped to see a sunset as they rode along. It was too late but there was still some light in the sky and towards the east, above a mountainous purple cloud mass, one star had pricked its way through.

As they walked towards Leslie's car, Steve drew her attention to the sky. She refused to look, saying there wasn't time, that they were an hour late for the cocktail party. She reminded Steve that she was her uncle's official hostess.

They got into a grey Cadillac.

"You should have let me drive myself," Steve said, in an effort to appease her.

"In which case you probably wouldn't have shown up at all!"

"But of course I would, Leslie. You know what it means to me to have an evening with you."

She started the engine and sent the car forward with a

suddenness that jerked Steve's head back. He turned and glanced curiously at her. What lay behind all this? She was not herself. He had expected some verbal chastisement, but not this angry mood.

The car flashed by the red brick façade of the hospital and swung with dangerous speed around a curve of gravelled driveway.

"Let's arrive at your uncle's party intact, if possible," suggested Steve cheerfully.

Leslie said nothing, but her foot exerted a shade less pressure on the accelerator, and Steve breathed more easily. He was nervous about meeting her uncle for the first time and dog-tired in the bargain—he had been up since four that morning when they had brought in an accident case—and he wondered, if Leslie was going to continue like this, if he wouldn't have been wiser to have stayed at the hospital and gone to bed.

It was Leslie who had interested him in becoming a full-time staff member of the Denton Clinic. Before the war, he mused, he wouldn't have taken to the idea particularly. At that time he was all for the rugged individualism that called for hanging out a shingle somewhere and taking his chances on starving. He had even thought he would rather starve than work indefinitely for another man, but he felt differently now.

As Leslie had pointed out, there were distinct advantages in belonging to a clinic. A stated salary, established hours, time off when he could live like a human being.

He took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket.

"Smoke?"

"There are some of mine in the glove compartment," she went on. "Light me one."

He opened the compartment and felt around in it until he found an onyx cigarette case. It was a handsome piece with her initials in tiny diamonds on the cover.

"Aren't you afraid this will be stolen?" he asked, as he lighted one of her monogrammed cigarettes.

Leslie shrugged. "What of it?"

"It must have cost a lot."

"I wouldn't know," she said indifferently. "Uncle Walt gave it to me."

A worried expression crossed his face. Her utter disinterest in money was the natural result of her upbringing. Leslie's parents had separated when she was a young child, and she had grown up under her wealthy and indulgent uncle's care.

"You ought to start figuring out just what money can buy, Leslie," he said.

"I really should," she agreed.

"Some day you may have to change your scale of living."

"I expect to," she replied, but without conviction.

The car was moving along a broad asphalt highway. House lights twinkled here and there as if the stars had set themselves low.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" Steve asked.

"Oh, the usual."

Leslie led a busy social life. She belonged to several clubs, often flew over to New York to visit friends or to shop, and after the war she had elected to go on with the Red Cross, giving them one day a week. She did no real work of any kind and it often seemed a pity to Steve for Leslie had brains and talent.

"Have you ever considered taking up medical research?" he asked tentatively.

Her laughter rippled out.

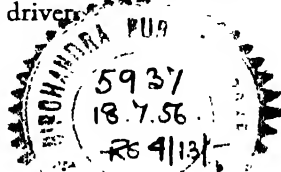
"What are you seeing, Steve?" she asked teasingly. "A second edition of Pierre and Marie Curie?"

"Something like that," he admitted, with a grin.

"You don't actually mean it?"

"You have the brains and the nerve," he insisted.

A picture flashed before him. Upper Assam, '44. A hot, sticky morning. He had been working for hours in the operating room—an outdoor job with a thatched roof—and he had stepped outside for a cigarette. He heard a car coming along the narrow, treacherous road which had been hewn from the jungle. When the machine came into sight he saw that it was a Red Cross ambulance with a girl driver.



He went to meet the car, wondering how a girl could take that sort of life when it was all he could do to take it himself.

The ambulance pulled up. Leslie got out. Her high mosquito boots were splashed with mud; the skirt of her uniform was bloodstained.

"Are you a doctor?"

"Yes."

She was smiling. The sun was on her hair. In that land of small dark women she looked to him like a golden goddess.

She had picked up two paratroopers who had been wounded by Jap snipers, she told Steve. They were in bad shape. Knowing only too well what the sight of mangled, bleeding American boys could do to one's nerves and stomach, Steve hastened to assure her that she needn't look at them again. He'd get somebody to help him carry them inside.

With a quizzical glance, Leslie informed him that he needn't worry about her. She could take anything, she said, and subsequently he had found that to be true.

"I don't know," Leslie was saying, "it takes patience to do research, and I'm notably short of that."

She was guiding the big car easily in and out of traffic on the main street, Springfield was a Massachusetts city some forty miles west of Boston.

"What have you been doing lately, Steve?" asked Leslie, as the car inched along behind a trolley.

"You know my routine," he said, surprised that he should ask. "Up at seven or earlier, bath, breakfast, ward visits. Looking at charts, listening to hearts, lungs and complaints. Doing all the operating I can get, snatching at lunch, then back to the wards."

"They work you too hard," she declared. "I'll be glad when you're out of that place."

He made no reply. They had left the trolley behind, and a boy on a bicycle was ahead of them. Leslie's headlights were on. Steve could see the boy standing up on his pedals and pumping.

Leslie blew her horn. The front wheel of the bicycle wavered

and for a horrible instant it seemed as if the boy and bicycle were doomed.

"Don't you like kids?" asked Steve weakly, when the danger was past.

"Certainly."

"You nearly hit that one, Leslie."

"I blew my horn, Steve."

"Yes, Right in his ear. You scared the tar out of him."

Steve was jumpy, Leslie observed aloud. Did that mean he had something on his mind?

"I have plenty on my mind." He was thinking of Mrs. Gillette and certain other patients.

Leslie leaned her elbow on the window, asking, "What's she like, Steve?"

"Who?"

"The nurse you were holding hands with while I cooled my heels downstairs."

He stared through the windshield, watching the Springville University take shape in the dusk like an iceberg rising up out of the sea.

"Who gave you that song and dance? Vin?"

"Yes. And you needn't use that tone, Steve. It's not funny."

"I quite agree," he said drily.

"You don't deny holding her hand?" asked Leslie, challenging a big red oil truck for the right of way.

Steve waited until the thunder of the truck was behind them.

"We were shaking hands," he said evenly, "there's quite a difference."

"I see." Leslie held out two bare, slender fingers. "Light me another cigarette, please."

He complied, then sat stiff and silent beside her, trying to think of something to say that would relieve the tension. He was not surprised that Vin should attempt to make trouble between them and he understood Leslie's impatience at being delayed, but she had spoken as if she didn't trust him.

"You're so gullible where women are concerned," Leslie told him presently.

"Am I?"

"A babe in arms," she stated. "Oh, you know a lot about their physical ailments but otherwise, nothing."

He sighed.

"I must be an awful fool."

"What's her name?" asked Leslie, reducing the speed of the car.

"Julie Greenwood," he said, after a moment of silent irritation, "and she lives in Maine not too far from my mother. That's what we were shaking hands about."

"Oh," murmured Leslie. "Vin said she was new."

"Yes."

"Pretty, Steve?"

"Not as pretty as you are, goddess."

The compliment missed fire.

"Of course you'd say that. Is she a blonde?"

"No." He remembered Julie's smooth, dark hair dressed so demurely, the way he'd seen in daguerreotypes.

He rolled down the window to get more air. Sounds came to him; the wind in trees; a cowbell clanging some distance off, as if to bring some child indoors from play; a dog barking joyously.

"Have you heard from your mother lately?" Leslie asked politely.

"Yes, I talked with her on the phone last night."

"How is she?"

"Well and happy."

"It seems ridiculous that I've never met her, Steve."

"I know, but you will. She's heard a lot about you."

"Has she?" Leslie sounded more cheerful and his spirits rose accordingly. "She was a nurse before her marriage, wasn't she, Steve?"

"Yes." Did he detect a shade of condescension in Leslie's voice? He smiled in the dark. He must tell her some day who his mother was and the circumstances which had led her to take up nursing.

Leslie asked, "Doesn't she get lonely living by herself?"

"I doubt it."

"What does she do all day?"

"Keeps house, gardens, goes where she's needed."

"I want to meet her, Steve."

"I want you to," he said.

He was recalling a conversation he had had with his mother about Leslie and also concerning his hopes of getting into the Denton Clinic.

It was a bright, clear day in September. They were in the garden back of Mrs. Lovett's white cottage. Steve was helping her pick the last of the pole beans, and she was drawing his attention to the satisfactory way in which the pods of her limas were thickening. She had remarked, laughingly, that she hoped Steve would marry a girl who liked gardening. It was so thrilling, she said, to plant seeds and watch them grow into something you could eat, share with your neighbours, and put up to enjoy all winter.

It was then that he had told her how he felt about Leslie.

"A rich girl, Steve?" His mother looked doubtful.

He had pointed out that it was Leslie's uncle who was rich.

Then he had mentioned his desire to get on the staff of the clinic, and once more he had seen that shadow of doubt in her eyes.

"You taking orders?" she murmured.

"Why not? I take them now."

"But that's different. You're getting your training."

Then, as if she were walking in where she felt she had no right to be, she added quickly that he knew best and that she'd be delighted to meet Leslie whenever Steve choose to bring them together.

Leslie was approaching an intersection where there was a traffic light. It was changing to red, but she kept her car in motion.

Steve heard the shrill blast of a policeman's whistle.

"You'd better pull up, Leslie."

"Why?"

"He probably recognized your car."

She shrugged and kept on going. "Uncle Walt will fix it."
"You've had things made easy for you all your life, haven't you?" Steve asked.

"Too easy," she admitted, with a laugh.

"People don't grow up until they've had some banging around," he observed, changing his position so he could stretch his legs.

"Well, bang me around then," she replied. "I might like it."

After a minute she asked, "Are we having dinner together?"

"I hope so."

"Where?"

"Oh, some place that coincides with a poor man's pocket-book."

If Steve were Vincent Rhead, said Leslie in a somewhat exasperated voice, he'd take her to an expensive place, let her pay the check, and think nothing of it. That wasn't his idea of entertaining a lady, replied Steve good-naturedly.

"I don't see any harm in it," declared Leslie.

"There probably isn't any," he said. "It's just the way you look at those things."

"We don't see eye to eye exactly, do we, Steve?"

"No. I wish we did."

Leslie sighed. "But I adore you," she murmured. "I love you so much that I can't bear to think of you being attentive to another woman." She doubled her right hand into a fist and struck the wheel with it. "When Vin came down and gave me a mental picture of you and that nurse, that Julie, hand in hand I . . . I was *afraid*, Steve."

He put his hand quickly on her knee.

"I know you better than that. You're fearless."

He was thinking again of Burma. There'd been no variety in their diet there, and one day the three of them—Leslie, Vin and he—had gone out peacock hunting. Vin was in the lead as they moved down a narrow jungle trail singing *On the Road to Mandalay*. All at once a blood-curdling yell came from him.

"Snake! Snake! Back, you two."

Only too willing to retreat at sight of a huge reptile that looked

fully ten feet long, Steve caught at Leslie's arm to draw her with him out of danger. Vin was taking aim but his gun wobbled so that he couldn't shoot, and it was Leslie who finally straddled the path and coolly put an end to the reptile.

Thinking it would please her, Steve said blithely, "A girl who could kill a huge snake while two men stood by, quaking, oughtn't to be afraid of a little brown-eyed nurse."

Leslie pulled away from him.

"So she has brown eyes, has she?"

He lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. A few minutes later Leslie was parking the car at the curb in front of her uncle's residence.

He looked up at the huge, grey stone structure, which was shaped like a miniature Windsor Castle even to a round lookout tower near the centre. It was a landmark in Springville. Since its erection fifteen years ago, sightseeing buses passed regularly by its doors. Steve had seen it countless times, but he had never been inside. There seemed to be literally hundreds of diamond-paned windows, and the whole structure was surrounded by a high iron fence.

Leslie turned off the ignition.

"Steve."

"Yes?"

"I apologize."

He realized she had had one of her quick turns of mood. She put her hand out to him. "Do you hate me?"

"You know I don't." He lifted her hand and kissed the palm of it. "I do think, though," he went on, half-serious, half-joking, "you could have benefited by a few more spankings in your extreme youth."

"Nobody gave a darn about my manners," Leslie said.

She sounded forlorn, and he remembered that she had been brought up largely by servants, high-salaried nursemaids, and governesses who hadn't cared what she did as long as life for them was comfortable and they got their salary. Leslie's father was a crackpot explorer whom she scarcely knew; her mother had lived in Paris for years.

"Did you have a tough time?" he asked tenderly.

"In a way," Leslie said, nodding. "I was left alone a lot and I had some queer fancies. I used to do some rather awful things to get attention, and finally I was told I'd better be good because God had His eye on me every minute." She gave a rueful laugh. "It made me so self-conscious that I fought furiously against undressing or taking a bath and then there was a time—several years, as I remember it—when I was utterly terrified of going to bed for fear I'd die in my sleep. It must have been that prayer they taught me. '*Now I lay me down to sleep.*' There's one line that goes, '*If I should die before I wake.*'" Leslie let out a long sigh as she took her hand from Steve's. "Could anything be worse for an imaginative child than to have the idea of death planted in her mind night after night?"

She got out of the car and walked around it, joining Steve on the sidewalk. She had appealed to his sympathy; shown him a side he had never seen before. It made him feel considerate of her and protective. He took her arm and held it close as they ascended the broad steps.

Leslie didn't mean to be jealous and possessive, he told himself. She hadn't had much real happiness. There was something fine between them; and she realized it and didn't want to lose it.

He could understand that.

They paused before a massive door while Leslie hunted in her grey handbag for the key.

"Do you think I'll pass muster?" Steve asked nervously.

She abandoned her search for the key with the remark that it must be in another bag. "With Uncle Walt?" she asked, as she pressed the bell. "Why, of course you will, darling. Play up to him, Steve." He detected a trace of impatience in her voice as if she felt that was something Steve should have figured out for himself. "If you want favours," she reminded, "you must rub people the right way."

His blond brows drew together in a frown. He took a last puff on his cigarette, dropped it, stepped on it, and then bent and picked it up and tossed it into the thick shrubbery that grew around the house.

"You mean I have to bow and scrape?"

"Now, Steve!"

"But I want my record to speak for me, Leslie."

"Of course," she agreed, "but you have to be diplomatic, too. People who want things should expect to go after them somewhat."

He could hear slow, measured steps coming towards the door from inside the house. He took his hat off and held it in his hand. The night wind ruffled his light hair and felt cool on his hot forehead.

Why should he feel confused and vaguely unhappy?

The door swung open.

"Come on, Steve." Leslie smiled at him over her shoulder.

He followed her inside.

CHAPTER III

"This is Dr. Lovett, Jocelyn," explained Leslie.

The butler was tall, exceptionally thin, and very English.

He took Steve's hat, regarding it doubtfully before he put it in a closet along with a lot of other hats.

"You're late, Miss," he told Leslie reproachfully.

Leslie nodded as she tossed off her furs and stepped to an oval mirror hanging over a heavy walnut console table. How was the party going? she asked. It was going well, the butler answered. That was good, commented Leslie. Jocelyn could now return to his post.

With a squaring of his thin shoulders the butler moved majestically from sight.

Steve said, "How on earth do you live up to him?"

Leslie was busy with her lipstick.

"Oh, Jocelyn's a darling when you get to know him, Steve."

"How long does that take?"

"Well, he's British," she laughed.

Steve moved towards a carved pedestal near a broad sweep of stairs and stood admiring a white porcelain statue of a Chinese woman seated with a child on her knee. The workmanship was exquisite. He remarked upon it and Leslie, finishing with her face, said, "That's the Buddhists' favourite goddess, Kouan-in. Remind me to show you the rest of Uncle Walt's porcelains, Steve. He has a marvellous collection."

Returning to the subject of Jocelyn, Steve said, "I don't think your butler approved of my hat."

"Well, we can hardly blame him for that, can we?" said Leslie lightly. She was looking Steve over. "Oh, darling, that necktie!"

His hand flew up.

"What's the matter with it?" He'd bought the necktie especially for this occasion. "It cost me two dollars."

"Did it, really?" Her voice was gentle. An affectionate mother addressing a beloved but benighted child. "Uncle Walt pays from ten to fifty dollars apiece for his neckties."

"Fifty dollars for a necktie?" He looked shocked.

"A man is judged by his clothes," said Leslie firmly. "They're hand-painted and signed by the artist."

"Who inherits them? Jocelyn?"

"Yes."

"It pays to buttle, doesn't it?"

Leslie nodded, her eyes dancing. Jocelyn probably sold them at a neat profit, she said. It wouldn't surprise her. He was very canny.

Side by side, they entered an immense, horseshoe-shaped room. Above dark panelling the walls were covered with rose-coloured brocade. Light poured down from several magnificent crystal chandeliers. The rose-coloured rug beneath Steve's feet felt like thick, spongy moss.

Scattered throughout the room were small groups of people, talking, laughing, drinking. The air was blue with smoke and heavy with the scent of roses. It seemed to Steve as if everywhere he looked his eyes encountered a bowl of white roses.

Leslie waved, first to one person, then to another. People were staring at Steve, but she did not pause to introduce him, explaining that she wanted him to meet her uncle first. He groaned inwardly as she walked him down the full length of the drawing-room. Give him a ward any day, he thought, with battleship linoleum on the floor, beds foot to foot and ugly-looking pipes suspended from the ceiling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw two women with their heads close together whispering. Probably speculating on his relationship to Leslie. Had him down as a fortune hunter, no doubt. When at last he heard Leslie say, "Uncle Walt, this is Steve Lovett," he felt like a Marathoner breaking the tape.

Dr. Denton extended his hand.

Steve's first impression was that he stood face to face with a tall wading bird, a crane or heron. Dr. Denton had the longest, thinnest legs Steve had ever seen. It seemed inevitable that he should draw one up under him, bend his small, dark head forward, and use that long sharp nose as a beak to pick up something from the floor. After this impression passed, however, Steve became aware of the fact that his host was a friendly and likeable man.

The brown eyes regarding him with such interest through horn-rimmed spectacles were shy and gentle, the large mouth had a kind and humorous expression.

They shook hands cordially.

"Delighted to know you, Dr. Lovett," the older man said, "I've heard a great deal about you." He spoke in a strange, husky whisper which conveyed the feeling that he wished his words to be kept confidential. Steve remembered that some years ago Dr. Denton had had an operation on his throat reputed to be cancer of the larynx.

"It's a pleasure to be here, sir," Steve said.

He relaxed. He could see that Walter Denton did not have to be played up to.

"Well, my dear," murmured Dr. Denton, his arm around Leslie, "what delayed you?"

"Traffic, my sweet," explained Leslie quickly, "every light

against us. Incidentally, I ran through a red one and frightened poor Steve half to death."

There was a bit of lint on Dr. Denton's double-breasted brown suit. Leslie brushed it off and, with a quick side glance at Steve, straightened her uncle's necktie. Steve had already taken note of the tie. It was a superb bit of artistry in shades of brown; a water scene with ducks flying low.

Leslie asked plaintively, "What happens if I'm summoned into court?"

"I'll take care of it," said her uncle, smiling.

A man's voice asked deeply, "What law have you been breaking now, Leslie?"

Leslie turned, extending both hands.

"Dick Kane! How are you?" She drew the newcomer into the circle. "I haven't seen you for ages."

"No fault of mine, Leslie." He sounded reproachful.

"I know," she murmured contritely, "we must get together soon." Her eyes smiled into his. Then she said, "I want you to meet Steve Lovett, Dick." She turned towards Steve. "This is Richard Kane. You've heard me speak of him."

"Often," said Steve, extending his hand.

Dr. Kane, who looked to be in his mid-forties, was a compactly built man of medium height, with a liberal sprinkling of white in his precisely cut black hair. He was tailored throughout in grey. Steve knew him by reputation. A bachelor from the fashionable part of Long Island, Kane had been with the Denton Clinic for ten years. It was said he had gone into medicine more with the idea of wielding power and collecting honours in his field than with the idea of treating sick people.

He had done well at it, reflected Steve.

He was a high-grade surgeon, a brilliant diagnostician, and a prolific writer on medical subjects.

"Glad to meet you, Lovett." Kane's handclasp was firm; his manner reserved yet friendly. It was only by a fleeting expression in the rather too closely set black eyes, that Steve was aware of how completely he was being appraised. The look was gone

in an instant and Kane was saying smoothly, "Do you enjoy these social shindigs?"

"Of course he does!" cried Leslie. "You men always pretend they're a bore, but you couldn't get on without them."

"You may be right, Leslie," laughed Kane, his eyes holding hers.

Dr. Denton spoke in his husky whisper.

"Ah, Jocelyn, you're just the man we want to see."

"Very good, sir." Jocelyn was holding out a large silver tray of cocktails.

"Martini or Manhattan, Steve?" asked Leslie.

"Martini, please."

"You, Dick?"

"The same."

"Uncle?"

"No, my dear, I've had my quota."

"Uncle Walt's a very temperate man," explained Leslie to Steve, as she helped herself to a Manhattan. As the butler moved silently away, a trimly uniformed maid approached. "What have you there, Anna?" asked Leslie. She looked closely at the two plates of canapés the maid was serving. "Anchovy, lobster, chicken liver, caviar," she recited. She paused, then asked, "Aren't there any hot ones?"

"They're all gone, Miss Townsend," Anna murmured apologetically. "Cook is making more."

"Oh. Well, bring them along when they're ready."

"Yes, Miss."

The men helped themselves to the canapés. Steve sipped his cocktail. It was cold and deliciously smooth. He watched the figures moving around the great room. It was a constantly shifting scene as they gathered and dispersed, gathered and dispersed. Music was coming from somewhere; voices singing a duet. He inquired what it was and Leslie said it was a record player.

"Tristan," murmured Richard Kane, "Kirsten Flagstad and Lauritz Melchior."

Leslie remarked that she was flying to New York the following day. Her wardrobe needed replenishing.

"Will you be gone long, my dear?" queried Dr. Denton anxiously.

No, said Leslie, smiling at him fondly as she patted his arm, she'd be back Monday morning. And now she must circulate among the guests or they would think her rude and neglectful.

She put down her empty cocktail glass on a nearby table, accepted a cigarette from Steve, smiled at him as he lighted it for her, then linked her arm through Richard Kane's.

"Come along, Dick. I need your support."

Dr. Denton suggested that Steve might be more comfortably seated.

They sat down in a comparatively secluded spot. Steve was by now convinced that Walter Denton had no more liking for these purely social gatherings than he had. It was all for Leslie. To keep her amused, to show off her beauty and brilliance.

"This is a marvellous house," Steve said, his eyes moving slowly around.

"I'm glad you like it, doctor. You must see the trophy room. Big game hunting, sir?"

Steve: "I used to do a lot of it before this happened." Dr.

"She reached up and touched his throat lightly. "Fishing, too," he explained.

"Your favourite outdoor sport," put in Steve.

"You're from Maine, Dr. Lovett?" asked Leslie's uncle.

Steve nodded. "I was born in Boothbay Harbour. My mother lives in Fryeburg."

"I see." Dr. Denton's eyes left Steve's face and centred for a moment on a portrait of Leslie which hung over a fireplace across the room. He appeared in deep thought. "And your mother?" he asked, bringing his eyes back to Steve's face.

Steve explained that he had never seen his father.

"He died overseas in 1918 when I was only a few months old."

"What a pity!" exclaimed Dr. Denton. He sat silent for a moment, regarding Steve closely. "You've done well under those circumstances," he said at last.

Steve replied quickly that his mother deserved most of the credit.

At that Walter Denton nodded, murmuring something about the power of women to turn adverse circumstances to good account. Steve knew from Leslie that her uncle had never married, and he wondered suddenly what the reason was. An unrequited love? Or Dr. Denton's sense of duty towards his adored niece?

Simultaneously, another thought occurred. Wasn't Walter Denton going to be rather desperately lonely when Leslie married? Would he expect her to live on here after marriage?

The latter idea disturbed Steve.

"Where did you graduate?" asked Dr. Denton.

"Bowdoin," Steve said, "and Harvard Medical. I interned at the Massachusetts General. I understand from Leslie that you started your surgical training there."

"Yes." Dr. Denton crossed his long legs and sat swinging one brown-shod foot while he smiled reminiscently as if recalling pleasant memories. Presently he asked, "Is it your intention to do general surgery?"

"That and nothing else," said Steve earnestly.

"A real lover of the knife?"

"Yes, sir."

Leslie was approaching, talking animatedly to some person she had in tow. Steve could see Richard Kane in a far corner of the room, his dark head bent solicitously over a stout woman with brassy-looking hair under her green hat. When Leslie and those with her were within a few feet, Steve and Dr. Denton arose.

"Here are some charming people I want you to meet, Steve."

She presented Ben Phelps, a nose and throat man; Tapley, who specialized in fractures; and a Dr. Murdock, whose forte was brain surgery. The men, all young and keen looking, shook hands warmly. They were all connected with the Denton Clinic. Their wives regarded Steve with bright, calculating eyes.

They talked awhile, then drifted away.

From time to time during the next half-hour, Leslie brought more people to meet Steve, among them the stout woman in

the green hat to whom Richard Kane had been paying such marked attention. Her name was Rhea Gardner, she sighed in Steve's ear that she was a lonely widow. While she was doing her best to flirt with the dignified Dr. Denton, Leslie warned Steve in an impish whisper to beware.

"She's had three husbands already, Steve."

Steve's head had begun to ache. He was relieved when Leslie came and announced that she felt she had done her duty. She was going to take Steve on a tour of the house, she told her uncle. She particularly wanted him to see the view from the tower room. It was comparable, in her opinion, to that from the top of the Mark Hopkins in San Francisco.

"Slightly less spectacular, Dr. Lovett, but well worth seeing," said Walter Denton. "But I want to ask you one question." Dr. Denton was standing with his long legs spread and one hand resting on the back of the chair in which he had been sitting. There was an odd, almost abashed, expression on his face. "What was your mother's name before her marriage?"

"Mary Lester, sir."

"I know her," replied the husky voice.

"Why, Uncle Walt!" Leslie sent a swift, amazed glance Steve's way.

"She was in training at the M.G.H. when I was there," explained Dr. Denton, looking past Steve and nodding politely to a guest who was looking his way. "You and your mother resemble each other," he told the astonished Steve, "except that your eyes are grey and hers blue." He shifted his position slightly, adding almost to himself, "Blue as the lakes of Killarney on a clear summer day."

Leslie's violet eyes were deep with feeling. She laid her hand gently on her uncle's arm.

"Were you in love with Mary Lester?"

"Yes." The tall, thin, famous man said it proudly.

"Did she know it, darling?" murmured Leslie.

"No," admitted Dr. Denton regretfully, "she was one of those inspired disciples of Florence Nightingale to whom nothing seemed to matter but her nursing."

"There was a reason for that," put in Steve.

He told them something of his mother's childhood. She was the daughter of a Boston merchant and eight years old when her brother was born. It was a home confinement and the carelessness of the attending nurse resulted in blood poisoning. Mary Lester's mother died. It made such an impression on the little girl that she grew up determined to be a nurse and a good one.

Steve went on to explain that his mother had married a third-year medical student while she was still in training.

A moment later, as he was moving away with Leslie, Dr. Denton's husky voice followed him.

"Kindly remember me to your mother when you see her next, Dr. Lovett."

There followed a tour of the huge house which left Steve dizzy. When they reached the third floor and were mounting a short flight of stairs that led to the tower room, Leslie said, "You never know what's in the back of people's minds, do you? In all these years Uncle Walt has never mentioned his early romance to me, Steve. I believe that's why he never married." Leslie was a step ahead of Steve. She turned and looked back at him, smiling. "You like Uncle Walt?"

"How could I help it, Leslie?" Steve paused, then touched boldly on a subject that had been worrying him. "How is he going to take it when you marry?"

Her high-arched, golden eyebrows lifted.

"He wants me to be happy, Steve."

"Yes, but what will he do without you?"

"Why should he do without me?" She looked puzzled.

"What I mean is . . . well, you wouldn't expect to go on living under his roof after marriage, would you?"

Leslie considered that in silence for a moment, then shrugged slightly, and said in a detached way that she hadn't given the matter any serious thought.

"I wish you would, Leslie."

She nodded as she moved up a step.

"I will, Steve."

"There's another thing," he said.

She turned. "Yes?"

"Why did you feel you had to lie to your uncle about the traffic holding us up? He'd have understood."

Perhaps he should have let that subject alone, thought Steve uncomfortably, as he observed the look of exasperation in Leslie's eyes. She swung around and faced him squarely.

"So you want to know why I lied?"

"Yes. I do. It wasn't necessary."

"I think it was."

"But why?"

Leslie stiffened her slender figure.

"Uncle Walt is fantastically attached to me, Steve. Nothing and nobody is quite good enough for me, if you know what I mean. If he thought I had been slighted in the least degree, he'd turn thumbs down on the person responsible."

"Sure," said Steve, with a puzzled frown, "but where do I come into that picture? We were late because Dr. Sylvester ran into the unexpected. If I'm any judge of character your uncle wouldn't hold that against me."

"I'm referring to your tête-à-tête with that brown-eyed nurse," said Leslie coldly. "Vin told me you hung around deliberately to speak to her. That was insult added to injury, Steve, and if Uncle Walt got wind of it he'd resent it just as I do."

She turned, mounted the one remaining step and pushed open a door. With set jaw Steve followed her over a threshold and into a circular room composed almost entirely of windows. He closed the door behind him and stood beside her. When his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he could see that there were several easy chairs standing about, and two or three small tables with match books and ashtrays on them.

He lit a cigarette, asking stiffly, "Does your uncle spend much time up here?"

"Yes." He noted with relief that Leslie's voice was almost back to normal. "He often watches the sun rise and set from this room. One of his hobbies is meteorology," she went on. "He can tell you about wind direction, the quantity of rain that's fallen during the season, and all that sort of thing. Come closer

to the window, Steve," she continued. He moved forward, then stood smoking and staring out at the sparkling lights of the city, the stars above, and the rooftops below. He could see a glimmer of light on the river and beyond, to the right of a line of trees which he knew to be poplars, the group of buildings which comprised the Denton Clinic. Nearby was the Walter Denton Hospital which looked, from this height and location, a little like the Kremlin.

"Can you pick out the Springville Hospital?" asked Leslie.

"Yes." He leaned forward. "Over there to the right. And I can distinguish the Lester Tavern."

Leslie turned her head towards him. "There isn't any such place, Steve."

"There was once. It's the Springville Historical Society now. One of my forebears, Edward Lester, erected it about the time they were constructing a turnpike to Boston. Earlier, the Indians had tried to scalp Eddie, so the story goes, but he outwitted them and lived to coin money in his tavern."

Leslie murmured, "I'm learning quite a lot about you tonight, Steve."

He enfolded her suddenly in his arms. "I'll let you in on something more. I'm crazy about you."

She clung to him in the darkness, murmuring, "Do you really mean it? Do you?"

"Would I say it if I didn't, sweetheart?"

They kissed, then stood arm in arm watching a red Neon sign flash on and off until Leslie proposed that they go to the music room. Steve was fond of music and she had promised to play for him.

They went to a small, informal room on the second floor in which Leslie said she had spent countless hours during her childhood, practising. There was an ebony grand piano near a window, some deep chairs and a chartreuse-coloured divan in front of a fireplace. Around the walls, in a series of framed niches, hung portraits of famous musicians.

Steve sat where he could watch Leslie's hands. She had long, tapering fingers and the most supple wrists he had ever seen.

She played selections from the classics, melodies Steve had been familiar with all his life but couldn't have named. After a while she swung into a medley of tunes which had been favourites with Steve in Burma. *Loch Lomond, Annie Laurie, My Old Kentucky Home.*

"Enough?" she asked at last.

"Not unless you're tired." He could have listened indefinitely. Her music rested him; made him feel at peace.

She played on for a few minutes, her eyes fixed idly on a painting of the youthful Mozart. Then all at once her fingers brought forth a minor chord, and while the echo of it was still in the room she turned on the piano bench and looked reproachfully at Steve.

"You're not showing me much attention."

"I'm adoring you from afar," Steve said, smiling, "it's safer."

Leslie struck another chord.

"Perhaps I should have brought Dick Kane up here. He understands women."

"So I noticed," said Steve drily.

"What do you mean, Steve?"

"He was making a great play for the widow in the green hat."

"Rhea Gardner?" Leslie laughed as she bent her head to blow a bit of dust from the polished top of the piano. "That was business."

"Was it?"

"Definitely. Rhea has a chronic appendix which isn't doing her the slightest good. She needs to have it out. She's been to the clinic for observation and Dick advised her to be operated on, but she's a born procrastinator."

"I see."

"It isn't as if she couldn't afford it, either," Leslie said, "Rhea has more money than she knows what to do with." Leslie smiled across the room at Steve. "Dick says Rhea will get around to it some day and he simply wants to keep her reminded that he's the man to do the operation."

"Kane's quite a politician," said Steve thoughtfully.

Leslie pursed her lips. "You have to be, don't you, to get where he is? He's more than that, though, Steve. He has a brilliant mind and he's splendid on organization, Uncle Walt says. I admire Dick a lot."

"So do I," said Steve, "even though I know he's in love with you."

Leslie laughed softly. "The time we waste talking about other people!" She held out both hands. "Come over here, darling. I need you."

In the shaded light of the twin piano lamps she had never looked more beautiful or desirable. Steve got up. Leslie was standing, waiting for him, eyes shining and lips parted expectantly. He tossed his still burning cigarette into an ashtray, strode across the room, and crushed her in his arms, his lips seeking hers with hungry passion.

Leslie pressed against him, eyes closed, her hands framing his face while her lips clung to his.

When at last they drew apart, she laughed breathlessly and said, "I feel as if I'd been on a long journey. Do you?"

"Yes."

"Darling, your eyes," she said, "the pupils . . ."

"What's the matter with them?"

"I never saw them so huge."

"I'm hungry," Steve told her in a low tone.

"Hungry?"

"For you. For love." He encircled her waist with his hands, drawing her slowly back into his arms. Leslie murmured in his ear, "Oh, darling, I feel the same way." Then, her breast rising with the tide of emotion, she said, "This room is as safe as a church. Nobody ever comes here but me."

The blood throbbed at his temples.

He inclined his head and once more drained sweetness from her lips.

He had lost his bearings and it didn't matter. Nothing mattered in Heaven or on earth, he thought unsteadily, but lifting Leslie in his arms and carrying her bodily to the divan in front of the fireplace.

He kissed her smooth white throat and the lobe of her ear and then, on the verge of sweeping her upward in his arms, he grew rigid and muttered almost violently, "No."

She puckered her smooth brow.

"What's the matter, Steve?"

His hands dropped to his sides. He was shaking.

"We can't do it this way," he said desperately. His lips had gone suddenly dry. He moistened them, muttering, "I want a cigarette."

For a moment Leslie looked as if he had said something monstrous. Then she lifted her chin high. "Well, help yourself. There are plenty of cigarettes around."

"Would you like one?" he asked humbly.

"Oh, don't bother about *me*, Steve."

She gave a hard, bleak look. He lowered his eyes and murmured abjectly, "I suppose you think me a fool?"

"You're the most exasperating man I've ever known," Leslie said angrily as she flung herself into a chair.

"I'll try and explain," he said.

"Don't bother, Steve."

"But I want to."

"Really, I'm not interested." Leslie gave a bitter laugh. "Let it never be said that I threw myself at any man! Just forget it, Steve."

"You know I can't do that, Leslie," he said miserably, "we're in love with each other. We expect to get married."

"Well, for goodness' sake, then . . ." she began, kicking at the beige-coloured broadloom rug with the toe of her patent leather pump.

He broke in with, "I wanted you just then, Leslie, more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. You can believe that." He was striking a match. It wavered in his hand. He steadied it and lit his cigarette. Inhaling deeply, he went on, "It's just that I don't want to spoil things for us by going off the deep end now. There'd be a momentary satisfaction, but afterwards . . ." he paused, walked to the fireplace and tossed the burnt match inside a black fire screen with brass handles, ". . . afterwards," he went

on, "well there wouldn't be so much to look forward to, would there?"

Leslie said nothing. She had taken off her hat. There was a red mark on her forehead. She was rubbing it and staring at the floor.

"When I really make love to you," went on Steve, moving so that he could stand with his back to the wall, "I want to drown in it. Sink without any feeling that I have to struggle up and start swimming until I'm ready to. I want to forget everything but your arms and your lips."

Leslie stirred, murmuring rebelliously, "You're so old-fashioned, Steve!"

"Call it that if you want to," he said, "but there's a lot more in this picture than our emotion. Can't we act sane even if we are in love? If I'm fortunate enough to get into the Denton Clinic, Leslie, I'd like that to come first. Then I'd feel as if I had the right to ask you to set the date for our marriage."

Leslie sighed and pulled her feet up under her. Looking at him from beneath her lashes, she asked, "But why not ask me now, Steve? Why not get it settled?"

He drew on his cigarette and then walked over and stood facing her.

"My damnable pride, I suppose. If we went downstairs engaged, your uncle might think I'd engineered it." He moved closer to her, put his hand on her hair. She looked as if she might be going to smile. He took heart and went on, "Any two people can let their feelings run away with them, but we want events in their proper sequence, don't we?"

"You and your principles," said Leslie in a small cross voice.

"I sound stuffy, do I?"

"You sound like Steve Lovett. Oh, well."

Leslie lowered her feet to the floor and stood up.

"You forget you're living in a very modern world, Steve." She picked up her hat and put it on, smoothing her pale gold hair with her hands. "I simply must meet your mother," she went on lightly. "I can hardly wait to know the woman who equipped you with your heroic ideals." There was a faintly jeering note

in her voice, but she was smiling at him forgivingly. "Will you take me with you the next time you go to Maine?" she asked.

"I certainly will."

Leslie's eyes held his.

"It's a promise, Steve?"

He cupped her chin in his hand, brushing her lips lightly with his.

"Yes, a promise."

CHAPTER IV

"Get back early, didn't you?" Vin was stretched out on the bed in pyjamas and dressing gown with a box of chocolates and a book entitled *The Corpse That Laughed*. He was addicted to crime fiction. Over the top of the book he glanced curiously at Steve. "Lovers' spat?"

Steve maintained an undisturbed countenance as he crossed the smoke-filled room and threw up the windows. It had been a most unsatisfactory evening, ending with another near-quarrel after he had got out of Leslie's car at the hospital, but he had no intention of catering to the meddling streak in Vin by confiding in him.

"Nothing like that," he said cheerfully, "she's flying to New York tomorrow. Wanted to get to bed early."

"Oh." Vin sounded disappointed. "When's she coming back?"

"Monday?"

"I bet she spends three hundred bucks a day over there."

"I wouldn't know," yawned Steve.

"How was the party?" asked Vin, his nervous fingers rummaging in the box beside him.

"Great."

"What does the inside of that castle look like?"

"Like the inside of a castle."

Vin leaned over the edge of the bed and dragged a match along the floor. "How many rooms?"

"I lost count."

"You would!"

"So would you," retorted Steve mildly. He took off his coat, moving towards the closet with it. "They're mostly in suites," he went on while he hunted for an empty coat hanger. "Denton has friends all over the world, Leslie said, and he likes to have them come and camp on him indefinitely."

"And I bet the majority of them develop surgical conditions while they're here," said Vin. "Wouldn't I like to have his racket! A king on a throne with a lot of monkeys jumping around for him. All he has to do is rake in the coin."

"That's what you think," replied Steve. A wire hanger clattered noisily to the floor of the closet. He bent and picked it up, fitting his coat over it. "It's no cinch running a big clinic," he declared, as he emerged from the closet.

"Kane does most of that, doesn't he?" asked Vin.

Steve paused in the act of taking off his necktie.

"What makes you think so?"

"That's the rumour." Vin watched Steve through half-closed eyes. "I wonder how much he gets a year?"

"Plenty," said Steve.

Vin nodded, then asked, "Where'd you and Leslie eat tonight?"

"The Duck and Partridge Grill."

"What'd you have?"

"Lobster Savannah."

It was during dinner, Steve recalled, that he had got in wrong again with Leslie. In his extreme weariness, he had yawned before he could stop himself. Was she boring him? Leslie had asked politely. He denied that and made a valiant attempt to be entertaining but later, when he proposed a movie, Leslie refused. "You'd only go to sleep." She insisted upon driving him back to the hospital. Then, when he got out of her car and turned to close the door, she caught his arm, giving him a little shake as she admonished, "Now, Steve, behave yourself while I'm in New York if you want to get into the Denton Clinic."

It had touched off something in him.

"Do you mean that you have influence with your uncle in his choice of men?" he asked incredulously.

"Uncle Walt adores me," Leslie said eagerly.

"That's beside the point. He could worship the ground you walked on and still have a mind of his own. You belittle him when you make statements like that, Leslie."

"I know Uncle Walt better than you do," she said impatiently.

"You can direct his taste in clothes," Steve told her, "and dictate what he's to wear and eat, but I don't believe for a minute that he consults your wishes before he picks men for the clinic."

She was furious. She leaned towards him biting her lips.

"I would fall in love with a doctor!"

He found himself laughing at her expression of anguish.

"Is it as bad as that, Leslie?"

"It's awful," she declared, putting her hand to her head.

"What's so horrible about it?"

"Well, for one thing I never can depend upon you, Steve. You're so wrapped up in your work that half the time you don't know I exist."

"That's not true," he said, leaning into the car to cover her hand with his, "but if you feel that way how do you dare contemplate marriage to me?"

She said, "I'm hoping that when you're in the clinic it will be different."

"I'll still be a doctor, Leslie."

"I know," she said, sighing, "I expect I'm building up trouble for myself."

It was a queer way of looking at marriage, he thought, even to a doctor. His mother hadn't felt that way. Of course, Kurt Lovett, his father, had never got as far as a practice. He was still a resident at the Maine General Hospital when he enlisted in the First World War, but all his life Steve had heard his mother exalt men in the medical profession. She seemed to think it an honour to be associated with them.

He had started to speak about that but Leslie was in no mood to listen.

"Let's not talk any more, Steve," she said wearily, "we're going around in circles and getting nowhere." She offered him her lips. He kissed her and she said, "New York will pep me up. It always does. Call me Monday, darling."

She drove off. Steve went into the hospital and up to his room, her words rankling in his mind, especially her insinuation that she could prevent him from securing a position in her uncle's clinic if she chose.

I'd like to call her bluff on that, he thought, hanging up his trousers.

"This is a punk plot," muttered Vin, turning a page, "I could do better myself."

"Why don't you try? You might make a fortune. Movies and everything, you know." Steve pulled his shirt, still partly buttoned, off over his head. "Anything exciting happen here tonight?"

"No."

"Did you look in on Wilson?"

"Sure."

"Tube working?"

"Yes." Vin looked up, his heavily lashed brown eyes filled with annoyance. "We've got the darndest collection of old crocks around here!"

"So what? You'll be an old crock yourself some day."

"Hope I die first."

"You won't, considering the care you take of yourself." Steve was holding the necktie he had taken off. "Did you report to Barker?" he asked.

Barker was the visiting man on duty. It was the resident's job to call him after the night visit through the wards, tell him what cases had come in, and report on the condition of the patients.

"Sure, sure," said Vin carelessly, "I covered everything. Was Denton friendly?"

"Yes."

"What'd you two talk about?" asked Vin.

"Oh, this and that."

"You're certainly non-communicative tonight." Vin ploughed

his fingers through his curly hair, making it stand upright like a bluejay's crest.

Steve did not reply. He was looking at a new photograph among the many that littered the top of Vincent Rhead's bureau. He had seen that welcome face with the dreamy eyes and fluffy blonde bangs around the hospital for a long time, but he hadn't known there was anything between Vin and the girl.

"What's Lena doing here?" he asked slowly.

Lena McCann and her married sister, Nellie Graham, were laboratory technicians.

Vin rested his book on his chest and stretched his arms high above his head, smiling as he said, "Good of her, isn't it? She had it taken especially for me."

"Lena's a fine girl, Vin." Steve looked hard at the recumbent figure.

"Who said she wasn't? A trifle prudish, but she'll overcome that."

"The kind that plays for keeps," reminded Steve.

Vin laughed as he opened his book again. "I have a snapshot of Leslie I could have enlarged," he said insolently. "She'd fit in well with the rest of them, don't you think?"

At that moment the telephone rang. As Vin made no move to answer it, Steve went over to the table and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Oh, Dr. Lovett, is that you?" He recognized the tense voice of Fannie Burbank, an oldish nurse who was specialing Mrs. Gillette. "Please come down at once."

"What's wrong?"

"Didn't Dr. Rhead tell you? I reported to him an hour ago that Mrs. Gillette's temperature was 104, pulse 150, respiration 32. He told me to put her into an oxygen tent but she isn't any better and I'm worried. I was just about to call Dr. Sylvester."

"I'll be right down."

Steve hung up.

"That was Burbank. Her patient's worse. She says she called you an hour ago."

"She did." Vin turned a page lazily. "I told her what to do."

"Why didn't you go down to see Mrs. Gillette?"

"I didn't consider it necessary."

There wasn't time to stand there talking. With compressed lips Steve went to the closet and got into a pair of white trousers. He had discovered long before this that Vin had no sense of responsibility. He acted as if sick people were a necessary evil, an interruption to his personal life.

"You take your medicine seriously, don't you, Steve?" Vin smiled as he made himself more comfortable on the bed. "Why kill yourself? You don't get any thanks for it."

"Shut up. Who wants thanks?" Steve was criss-crossing a handkerchief at his throat. He buttoned his white coat over it.

"Okay, okay," Vin was airy, "be a martyr. See what it gets you."

Steve went out of the room. Running down a flight of stairs, he told himself to forget Vin and his queer makeup. His job was to concentrate on the patients. For nearly two years Steve had had the exceptional opportunity of working with John Sylvester. By the bedside, in the lab, and at the operating table he had been privileged to draw inexhaustibly from the older man's book of learning and experience. He was deeply grateful and he knew the only way he could repay his debt was to leave behind him as good a record as possible.

Thank goodness he'd come home early.

He moved through a swinging door and emerged on to the second floor where Mrs. Gillette was. She was at the far end of the corridor, and as he hastened towards her room he could hear coughing and sighing and restless movements from beyond the doors he passed.

The hospital was a dreary place at night; lights dimmed, flowers wilting in vases outside doors, a morgue-like chill over everything. He didn't envy the nurses on night duty. There was always that feeling that even the patients in good condition might pass out in their sleep or suddenly go berserk and jump out of windows.

Mrs. Gillette was in a semi-private room. As he entered, Fannie

Burbank, a lean and angular spinster of middle age, whose avowed ambition was to "die with her boots on," was bending over with her fingers on her patient's pulse. She straightened up when she heard Steve and turned towards him, her sallow face expressing relief.

She was not as quick and resourceful as some of the younger nurses, but she was conscientious to the last degree. Her patients were human beings to her, not just fretting sick people who gave her a chance to earn her living.

"I'm worried, doctor."

"I know you are." Steve moved towards the bed. "Let's have a look at your patient."

He was thinking of the six children as he stood by the bed studying the sick woman through the cellophane of the oxygen tent.

The patient's eyes met Steve's. They were bulging from her head. Her mouth was open. Every breath seemed to be an agony.

"Put a screen around the other bed, Miss Burbank," Steve ordered.

"Yes, doctor."

The woman in the next bed was a convalescent. She rose on her elbow, blue eyes protruding with fear.

"She going to die?"

"No, no," murmured Miss Burbank soothingly. She moved to get the screen.

The blue-eyed woman crossed herself, asking Steve, "When they put you in that thing, it's the end, isn't it?"

He shook his head at her. Drama in the night, he thought. Something to store up and talk about for the rest of her life.

"There I was right in the next bed . . ."

"Lie down," he said, "and go to sleep."

"Sleep, doctor?" Her look rebuked him.

"Well, don't talk, anyway."

Miss Burbank erected a white screen between the two beds.

"What shall I do now, Dr. Lovett?"

"Take her out of the oxygen tent. I want to make an examination."

When the tent was removed a dreadful rasping sound filled the room.

"Poor soul," murmured the occupant of the next bed.

Steve took his stethoscope from his pocket. He bent over Mrs. Gillette, grey eyes smiling encouragement.

"Take it easy, Mom," he murmured.

Her eyes implored him not to let her die. "My—poor—babies," she gasped.

"We'll have you home in jig time," Steve promised.

He sounded more confident than he felt. She was in a bad way, he realized, as, having gone carefully over her chest, he straightened up and stood looking down at her, the stethoscope dangling from his hand. There was a massive collapse of her right lung due to a plug of mucus. If she was going to live she had to cough that mucus up without delay. He stood there, considering the problem. Should he put a catheter in her trachea? It might induce coughing but it would consume time.

Time was at a premium.

She was rapidly reaching the point of exhaustion. He must act quickly.

"Raise her," he said.

"What are you going to do?" asked Miss Burbank fearfully.

He repeated the order. "Raise her."

Miss Burbank slipped her arm behind the patient. The woman in the next bed was peeking with terrified eyes around the edge of the screen. Outside the wind had risen and Steve could hear it moaning in the treetops.

He stepped behind both nurse and patient.

"Pull up her gown," he said.

Miss Burbank complied.

Now, he thought, and with all the strength he could muster he brought the flat of his big hand against the lower right portion of Mrs. Gillette's back.

The blow threw both patient and nurse forward on the bed and evoked a thin, outraged scream from the convalescent woman.

"How cruel!"

He knew how it must have looked, a big brute of a doctor pounding a sick woman on the back. But it had worked. It had made the patient cough up the mucus. As if by magic she had begun to breathe almost normally.

With a look of gratitude, Fannie Burbank lowered her patient carefully to the pillow and stood up.

Her tired face assumed a worshipful expression.

"You're a good doctor. I'm sorry we're going to lose you so soon."

"Thank you, Miss Burbank," he said smiling.

"Shall I put the patient back in the oxygen tent?" the nurse asked.

"Yes." Mrs. Gillette was attempting to thank him. He patted her shoulder. "All right, Mom, I know." He looked at Miss Burbank. "We'll give her some penicillin. I'll write an order for it. She'll be okay now."

He walked out of the room and was half-way down the corridor when he heard scurrying steps behind him. He turned and saw Miss Burbank.

"May I have a word with you, Dr. Lovett?"

"Certainly."

He knew she was given to little speeches when her emotions had been aroused. He prepared himself to listen.

Where did Steve intend to start practice? she asked earnestly. He hesitated, and she went on quickly to say that she was asking because she hoped he was going to be where she could help him out. It wasn't always easy for young doctors to get good nursing for their cases, a good many girls refused to work for any but well-established physicians, but she felt differently. There was more to nursing than just the money one received for it, she continued, her tired face assuming a saint's expression, she liked to help people. She didn't care how difficult her cases were. Incurable or otherwise, Dr. Lovett would find her ready.

She stood there, rubbing the bony wrist of one hand with the fingers of the other while she waited for Steve to reply. Looking at her elderly, worn face and remembering the many nights he

had seen her on duty, he reflected that, although it sometimes seemed as if ideals had gone quite out of circulation, you had only to meet people like Fannie Burbank to know that wasn't true.

Almost wishing he was going to be in a position to accept her offer, he said, "I heartily appreciate your words, Miss Burbank, but I don't anticipate going into practice for myself."

"You'll be assisting some older doctor for a while?"

"No, not that, but I have hopes in the direction of the Denton Clinic."

She looked at him gravely, asking, "Is there a future?"

"A magnificent one," he said facetiously, "I can sleep nights."

She drew back as if he had struck her. For a moment her red-rimmed eyes regarded him indignantly. Then she turned and walked quickly back to her patient's room.

The end of a perfect evening, thought Steve, as he walked on.

At the nurses' station he paused to write the order for penicillin. A sigh escaped him, and a nurse who was sitting there thumbing through a copy of *R.N.*, a journal for nurses, looked up inquiringly.

"What's the matter? Somebody been pushing you around?"

"Everybody." He thought of Jocelyn's disdainful inspection of his hat, of Vin's lazy assumption that Steve would do his work, of Leslie's implication that he couldn't qualify by himself for a place on the Denton Clinic staff.

"Well, it's your own fault," the girl said.

"Is it?" He dipped a pen in ink and wrote in the order book.

"Yes. Give 'em back as good as they send. That's my motto."

He blotted his writing and closed the order book. Somewhere on the floor a patient groaned. From a bathroom came the sound of running water.

Steve stood up slowly.

"You've given me an idea. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," she said, "I'm full of them."

As he went off to bed a letter was forming in his mind. He had decided he would write without Leslie's knowledge to Walter Denton applying for a position. That should show him exactly where he stood.

CHAPTER V

It was a difficult letter to compose.

On Friday, having tried to get it down on paper half a dozen times without success, Steve decided that he needed his mother's assistance. She was good at composition, she had a typewriter, and he wanted to see her anyway. Vin agreed to stay on duty from Sunday morning until Monday morning and at six a.m. Sunday, wearing a tan sports suit and smoking his favourite square-bowled briar, Steve drove out of the hospital grounds and headed north. He had some sheets of hospital stationery and the satisfactory feeling of an important mission about to be accomplished.

Only one thing worried him.

He was aware that he had promised to take Leslie on his next trip to Maine. He didn't like breaking that promise, but under the circumstances he could hardly have taken her with him, and besides she was in New York.

He was driving down the main street of Springville thinking of Leslie asleep in her bed at the Waldorf-Astoria, where she always stayed, when his eye picked up the solitary figure of a girl waiting at the bus stop. She was looking in the opposite direction, but he recognized the straight, slender figure belted into a navy blue wool coat, the red-lined hood of which was thrown back, leaving a smooth brown head uncovered.

As he stopped the car, she turned towards him.

"Good morning, Julie."

She looked at him with astonished eyes. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose were pink from the cold air.

"Why, Dr. Lovett, where did you come from?"

"I slipped out of my strait-jacket when the keepers weren't looking," he laughed. "Can I give you a lift?"

She glanced down at a large square box on the curb beside her.

"It depends on where you're going. I'm headed for Maine."

"So am I." He opened the door. "Hop in."

"You're sure it won't inconvenience you?"

"Positive."

The dimple in her cheek made a brief appearance. She was certainly in luck, she murmured, as she put her box on the back seat and got in beside Steve.

"Going to see your family?" he asked as the car moved forward.

She nodded, saying, "My brother, Neil. There are only two of us now. He's an artist. I'm taking him some things he needs."

"That's a sisterly act," Steve commented.

"We've always been close, Dr. Lovett. I'm two years older. I suppose I have a motherly attitude towards Neil. Father died of pneumonia when I was eight and mother passed on nine years ago."

"I see," murmured Steve. Julie had continued to do a superlatively good job at the hospital, and he was glad of this opportunity to get better acquainted with her.

The windows of the car were open. Her hair was blowing. Was there too much breeze, he asked. Oh, no, she said quickly, she loved it. She had a red and blue scarf around her throat. She took it off and tied it over her head, knotting it, peasant fashion, under her firm young chin, remarking at the same time that she always felt as if she belonged in the steerage when she wore a scarf over her head.

"It's becoming, Julie." He glanced sideways, observing what a cute nose she had. It was straight almost to the end, and then it turned up slightly. "What caused your mother's death?" he asked.

It was an accident, sighed Julie. Her mother had slipped on some ice one winter morning when she was going from the house to the barn and had fallen, hitting her head. A brain tumour had developed. She was operated on but lived only a short time afterwards.

"You've had some hard knocks, Julie."

"Well, yes," she admitted, "but no worse than a lot of other people."

She wasn't the kind, he saw, to bemoan her lot.

"Cigarette?" he asked.

"Thanks, I have some."

She crossed her slender legs and felt around in a commodious blue handbag. "They're here somewhere," she murmured, and after rummaging for another minute she brought forth a battered-looking package.

Steve pressed the cigarette lighter on his dashboard and when it clicked, signifying its readiness to be used, drew it out and held it towards her. The movement of the car made his hand shake. Without a trace of affectation Julie covered it with hers and held the lighter steady.

"Thanks," she said easily.

Steve's respect for her increased. That had been the moment to start a flirtation if she had been so inclined, but Julie had let it pass as if it hadn't existed. There was nothing cheap or silly about her. She had no desire to pose or to pretend to be what she wasn't. He liked her voice and her manner; he was pleased to have her here beside him. She was quiet and sincere, and he admired the rational way in which she had accepted what life had brought to her.

Furthermore, she was a comfortable person to be with. He felt that he could either talk or remain silent with no suggestion of awkwardness between them.

The car moved on for a mile or so. Then Steve asked how they were treating Julie at the hospital.

"I couldn't ask for anything better," she said at once.

"Good," He was thinking particularly of Vin. Yesterday he had overheard Vin trying to date Julie. She had turned him down politely, and Vin had acted rather surly.

"If you need a helping hand at any time, Julie, you know where mine is."

"Thank you, Dr. Lovett. It's like you to offer, but I'm used to taking care of myself."

"Yes, I can see that. Tell me more about your life."

The car was moving in a north-easterly direction and ahead of them, in a pearly sky, the sun was trying to penetrate a grey fog

that had come in early over the ocean. A pale lemon colour first appeared. This deepened slowly to yellow and then, with the force of a silent, world-shaking explosion, the sun burst through, drenching the world in liquid gold.

Julie drew her breath in sharply, and Steve realized that she had been watching the sky too.

"What a gorgeous spectacle!" she cried.

"Worth getting up early for, isn't it?" Steve said.

Julie nodded vigorously.

"People who sleep the early hours away don't know what they miss."

"You're right." He thought of Leslie. She never arose before nine unless there was some particular reason for doing so. Would she keep to that habit after they were married? Well, he was a fair cook. He could get his own breakfast.

The thought of breakfast reminded him that he was hungry. There was a pretty good place to eat just before they crossed the State line into New Hampshire. They'd stop there, he decided.

"There isn't much to tell," Julie was saying, "my father was a farmer in a modest way, my mother a school teacher before her marriage. When they were both alive we had pigs and chickens and two cows. Also, a vegetable garden and our blueberry patch. After my father died we took in roomers."

They were nearing a railroad crossing. The gates were down; a long string of faded red and yellow box-cars crawled along the tracks. Steve's eyes followed their progress as Julie went on smoking and talking. After her mother died it was a question, she said, as to whether or not she and Neil could get along without selling their home. They were advised to sell and to split up, Neil to live with a minister who had offered him a home and Julie to go to some cousins in Ohio. Neither of them wanted to do that. They talked it over and decided they could swing it alone.

"Neil was wonderful," said Julie softly.

"I suppose he grew up overnight?"

"Yes. He wasn't cut out to be a farmer but the way that boy tore into chores! I think he must have travelled fifty miles a day

picking up a quarter here and a quarter there. He chopped wood, cut grass, shovelled snow, ran errands, washed windows, picked apples and blueberries, ploughed, milked, mended fences, pitched hay——” She stopped for breath, then added, “Oh, I couldn’t name all the things he did to help keep us going.”

“You must have done your share, too,” Steve said.

“I had just started my training,” Julie replied. “Neil insisted that I keep on.”

“Wise boy.”

She smoked silently for a while, then tossed her cigarette out. It was still burning and with a quick, “I didn’t mean to do that,” she got out of the car, found the cigarette, and extinguished it.

“I’m fire-conscious when the country’s so dry,” she explained.

The boxcars finally passed. The gates were raised. The car crossed the railroad tracks and picked up speed.

Steve asked where Julie had trained. At the Deaconess Hospital in Boston, she answered, adding that she had been in the Navy for a while, and since the war done some private nursing. She liked institutional work though, and she was glad she’d applied for duty at the Springville Hospital. The atmosphere was friendly and she was near enough home so that she could see Neil often.

“Have you made plans for the future?” asked Steve, stopping the car at an intersection.

Julie shook her head emphatically. “I don’t do that any more.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a waste of time,” she said lightly, “I’ve discovered that the game doesn’t go as planned.”

“I see.” He was silent for a moment, thinking of his own carefully laid out future. Presently he asked, “Why doesn’t it, Julie?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but I’m working on it.”

“When your research yields results let me know.”

“I’ll do that,” she replied.

They laughed together; the green light shone; the car moved on. Ahead of them, on the right, a boy and a dog were moving across an open field of tall grass which showed the pinkish tinge

of autumn. The dog, a fine English setter, suddenly picked up a scent and froze into immobility.

"Do you like dogs?" asked Steve

"I adore them," said Julie. "My brother has a Belgian shepherd, a war dog."

"That's interesting," commented Steve. "Was he with your brother in the war?"

No, said Julie. Rowdy, the dog, had served with the Marines. Neil was an ex-Seabee.

Steve's eyes were on a maple tree which had become a golden symbol of autumn ahead of its fellows. He noted the melancholy tone in Julie's voice when she spoke about her brother. Her mood seemed to change whenever Neil's name came into the conversation, as if the very mention of him brought anguish to her heart.

"How old are you, Julie?" Steve asked presently.

"Nearly twenty-five."

"You'll be getting married some day."

"I hope so."

"You like the prospect?" he asked, turning his head to smile at her.

"Doesn't every woman?" she countered. After a moment she added, "I hope I have a large family."

"How many?" he asked, amused.

"Well, six or seven."

"You're ambitious, aren't you?"

"I guess so."

"It's good to know your own mind," Steve said.

"My mother drilled independence into us, Dr. Lovett."

Steve, an only child, had always wanted to be one of a large family, and with pleasant visions of Julie and her brood-to-be, he asked somewhat diffidently if she had yet selected the father of her future children.

"Heavens, no," she exclaimed, regarding him with lifted eyebrows.

Well, he said lamely, he'd just asked, that's all. What kind of a man did she want? That was difficult to put into words, Julie

replied seriously. She hadn't any decided preferences as to height, weight, or complexion, she went on, but he'd have to be somebody she could respect and look up to.

"You don't insist on wearing the pants?" asked Steve, grinning.

"It wouldn't be a real marriage, if I did," she answered firmly.

"You take marriage seriously, then?"

"Yes," she said quietly, "I do."

"You'd even marry a doctor and make a go of it?"

She uncrossed her legs and changed her position so that she was more nearly facing him. With her clear brown eyes on his face she said, "You sound as if it were an added risk for a girl to marry a doctor."

Remembering Leslie's attitude, he asked, "Isn't it?"

"Why?" demanded Julie.

He stared through the windshield at the tarnished-looking clump of golden rod. Her directness had thrown him a bit off balance. It was stimulating, though, to discuss marriage with her. She had a clear, straight-thinking mind and she wasn't afraid to say what she thought.

"Well, for one thing," Steve said, deliberately quoting Leslie, "doctors aren't dependable when it comes to social engagements."

"How can they be? They have bigger things at stake."

He must remember that. It was a good line. No. No, it wouldn't work. Not with Leslie. He would only insult her if he indicated that he had anything more important to do than being with her.

"But we're so wrapped up in medicine," he went on, again quoting, "we're oblivious to everything else."

"If a man is going to be a success he has to put his work first," Julie stated firmly. "I want my husband to be a success, and I shall try to help him be one by understanding his problems." She wrinkled her brow and went on, "As far as marriage to a doctor is concerned I can't see any particular hardship in it any more than there is in marriage to a minister, a farmer, lawyer, or a business man. The main stumbling block is marriage itself,

isn't it? Opposites attract," she continued earnestly, "and they're still opposites after the ceremony. A couple has to accept and be intelligent about each other's discrepancies if a marriage is to endure. After all," she laughed, "doctors are only men."

She opened her handbag and extracted a handkerchief. A whiff of violets brushed Steve's nostrils, reminding him of spring days in his youth when he used to go into the woods and pick the first violets for his mother. Julie, with her courage and her sound ideas, would appeal to his mother, he mused. He must have the two meet.

"How's your appetite, Julie?"

"I'm ravenous," she admitted frankly.

"So am I. There's a place a few miles ahead where we can stop."

They were still discussing marriage when Steve brought the car to a halt before a lunch cart which looked like a reconverted streetcar. Inside there was a long, clean counter with white enamel stools. A huge-nosed man in a cook's cap greeted Steve like an old friend.

"What'll it be, doctor? Ham and eggs? Coffee's ready."

"You don't have to tell me that, Mac. I smelled it half a mile back. Ham and eggs for you, Julie?"

"Wonderful!" She sniffed the air as she removed the scarf from her head and tucked it into her pocket.

"How's your wife feeling?" Steve asked Mac, as the ham began to sizzle in the frying-pan.

"Great, doctor. Them capsules you advised fixed her up. Says she feels good enough now to spit on the ceiling."

Julie's eyes twinkled. "Your fame is spreading," she murmured.

"Bound to," he murmured back.

"I'll be telling people I knew you 'when'," laughed Julie.

He liked her more and more. This was turning out to be a mighty pleasant trip, he thought.

After they had eaten and were on their way again, Julie brought up the subject of the hospital, and they discussed the personalities of the different men on the staff. She liked and

admired Dr. Sylvester, Julie said, with his quiet yet forcible character and his indifference to criticism; she thought Caleb Morton, a small, energetic pediatrician with a magical way of handling children, perfectly fitted for his job; he recognized the ability of Dr. Brian McCormick, she said, but she rather dreaded his cold eyes and blustering manner.

"He sweeps in with the velocity of a hurricane," she remarked, with a little shiver.

McCormick was a temperamental Irishman, explained Steve, and not too sure of himself. Hence the war lord manner. It was only five years since he had been specializing in surgery. He had been taken on the staff during the war when there was a dearth of civilian surgeons.

"That explains it," nodded Julie. She mentioned one or two others and then said slowly, "I can't quite make up my mind about Dr. Rhead. He's a good technician, but ethics don't seem to exist for him. He speaks about operations as if they were business deals."

"They are for him," said Steve.

"He puts a person on the defensive," Julie observed.

"It's because of Vin's background," said Steve. On one side of the road was a white farmhouse and beyond it a fenced-in pasture where a brown mare was cropping grass. A boy came out of the house and went towards the pasture. The mare lifted her head and trotted towards him, her black mane shining in the sun like patent leather. Watching the scene, Steve continued, "Vin had an impoverished boyhood and it seems to have embittered him—made him feel that the world owes him a living. His father, François Rambaud, owns a little variety store in the mill section of Springville. They call him 'Papa François.' It nearly broke the old man's heart some years ago when Vin had his name legally changed."

"Why did he do that? Is he ashamed of his father?"

"I'm not sure. He seems to think that he'd get only mill people for patients if he practised in Springville under his father's name."

Julie asked, "Is he going to settle in Springville?"

"He hasn't reached any decision as far as I know," Steve told her.

In Laconia they stopped for gas, getting out to walk around and stretch their legs while the tank was being filled. Steve repacked his pipe and lighted it. Julie put on a pair of dark glasses.

"What a perfect day, Dr. Lovett," she said as they took the road again.

Yes, Steve said, but why the formality? He didn't like that "Dr. Lovett" business, he declared. It made him feel old and venerable. Wouldn't she call him "Steve" the way his other friends did?

Certainly, laughed Julie, she'd be only too pleased.

"They tell me you're leaving the hospital soon, Steve," she said, after a slight pause. "Where will you settle?"

"If I have any luck, Julie, I'll land a job in the Denton Clinic."

"Really?" She sounded surprised.

"Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"Why, yes, if you want to work with a group."

"Group medicine is important," pointed out Steve.

"Yes, it is," she said politely.

"You don't sound exactly enthusiastic, Julie."

"I don't know much about clinics," she murmured.

"Don't you think I'd make a successful five o'clock surgeon?" he asked lightly.

A smile played around her pretty, red-lipped mouth.

"Well, Steve, I'm not sure. You'll be pretty much told what to do, won't you?"

"I suppose so but . . ."

"Would this be permanent," she broke in, "or just a matter of more training?"

"Permanent."

"I wonder if you can take it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've watched you in the operating room. You don't talk much, but you definitely know what you want. You're quiet

and patient but I wouldn't want to be the one who tried to walk over you."

"I'm that bad, am I?" he asked amused.

"And you have initiative," she went on, her fingers playing with the clasp of her handbag. "It seems to me you run a risk of losing that if you join a group."

"But isn't it an advantage to feel economically secure, Julie?"

"To a certain extent," she said quickly, "but beyond that you might find yourself stagnating."

"Horrors?" he said.

Julie threw back her head and laughed.

"You asked for it, and it's only my own point of view, anyway. I hope you don't mind my bluntness?"

"I like it, Julie."

"I never could beat about the bush," she said, shaking her head. "Tell me what led you into medicine, Steve."

He had followed in his father's footsteps, Steve told her. He gave her a few facts about his father, Kurt Lovett, how the latter had been born in a small fishing settlement in Newagen, Maine, the son of a fisherman who went regularly to the Grand Banks and who eventually had been lost at sea. His death threw the support of the family on Kurt's grandfather, a lobsterman. Early in his life the grandfather had lost a hand from infection of a cut. He wore an iron hook which was a great handicap. He impressed upon his grandson the importance of good medical care, and it was this that made Kurt decide to be a doctor when he grew up.

"How interesting," said Julie, "and was your mother born in Newagen, too?"

"No," said Steve, enjoying the whiff of freshly cut timber that came to him from the wooded stretch through which the car was passing. "Mother had been a summer resident at Newagen. She went there with her aunt, a wealthy spinster who, at that time, resided in Springville and who had taken her niece to live with her. There was the devil to pay," Steve added, laughing, "when the aunt discovered that her niece was in love with a fisherman's son."

Julie was a good listener and he went on talking as they drove

around the southern end of Lake Winnepesaukee. Above the sparkling water the sky was softly blue and cloudless. The river smell was flat and clean.

"A couple of good frosts," observed Steve, "and we'll have some scenery. Has your brother a car so you can get up into the mountains?"

"Neil can't drive," said Julie.

Her voice had assumed that despondent tone.

"Why not?" asked Steve.

"He's a wheelchair case." Out of the corner of his eye Steve saw her hands tighten together in her lap. "Neil was wounded in the invasion of Peleliu Island," she went on. "Both his legs have been amputated above his knees."

"I'm terribly sorry, Julie. Has it embittered him?"

"No," said Julie, "Neil is happy. He has it all figured out. I was afraid he'd come back home from the hospital maladjusted, but I didn't know my brother then as well as I do now. Neil never liked farming. He'd done it because he had to, but ever since he was a little boy he's wanted to be an artist. He has a natural gift for painting, but before the war his conscience wouldn't let him do it. Now that his legs are gone he feels he has a right to use his hands in the way he has always wanted to."

Listening to the story and the sound of her voice, Steve realized that the tragic accident had taken more out of Julie than it had out of the boy. Steve had encountered that before; the handicapped carried along above pain and confusion by an inner wave of rationalization while members of the family descended into the depths of despair over the plight of the loved one.

"I want to meet your brother," Steve said, putting his hand on Julie's for a moment.

"I want you to, Steve."

A grey cat darted out from the tall grass at the side of the road. Steve slowed up to avoid hitting her and as his foot pressed on the accelerator again he said, "We're making good time. Much better than you would have made by bus. Could you spare the

extra time to run on to Fryeburg and say hello to my mother? Then I could take you back home."

"I can't think of a more pleasant way to wind up our ride together," said Julie, her voice once more cheerful.

CHAPTER VI

"I like Julie, Steve," said Mary Lovett enthusiastically.

Steve was in his mother's blue and yellow kitchen standing before the sink trying to force the edge of a kitchen knife under the cover of a jar, while his mother worked shortening into flour for some turnovers. "I knew you would," he said, wrinkling his face up over the task in hand, "she's a crackerjack scrub nurse, too."

"I'm not surprised to hear that," commented Mrs. Lovett, adding ice water sparingly to the mixture in her bowl. "I imagine she'd do well at whatever she attempted."

"Yes. I only wish you'd brought this jar out when she was around."

"Is it as tight as all that?"

"Tighter."

"That's why my preserves never spoil," said Mrs. Lovett complacently. She dropped the dough on a floured board and rolled it quickly to a thin sheet. She was past fifty, and her naturally curly blonde hair showed traces of grey, but her eyes were strong and clear and her face youthful. "Is it coming?" she asked.

"At last!"

She turned with a teaspoon in her hand. "Let me taste it, Steve. Mmm. As good as the day I put it down. Venison makes better mincemeat than beef, to my taste."

"Hunting season opens soon," said Steve. "I'll get you some more."

Mrs. Lovett nodded. She began to cut the dough in circles, asking, "How's Leslic?"

"Fine. Gallivanting around New York."

"Oh?" Mrs. Lovett dropped a spoonful of mincemeat between two circles of dough and pressed the edges together with the tines of a fork. "When do you have to go back, Steve?"

"I told Julie I'd pick her up at the crack of dawn."

"I'll set the alarm," said his mother. She sniffed the air in which there was a pleasant scent of frying chicken. "Take a look at that chicken, Steve," she said, handing him a long-tined fork, "it ought to be done by now." She went back to her turnovers. "Tell me about Julie's brother."

Steve halted by the stove. Neil was a wonderful person, he said, a boy who had come back from war crippled in body but strong in spirit. He didn't want pity, and he refused to be dependent. Didn't Neil have anyone to take care of him? asked Mrs. Lovett. A woman came in once a week to clean, said Steve, as he lifted the cover from the frying pan and began to turn the chicken over, piece by piece. The neighbours dropped in but Neil didn't encourage callers. He was very adept at getting around in his chair, he could cook his own meals, and he had his dog for company.

"Has he talent, Steve?"

"A lot, I'd say."

"Perhaps he'll make a name for himself."

"Yes."

"What is he painting?"

"A distant scene of a mountain. He talked about rhythm, movement, tension. Said he wanted to paint the mountain not as it looked from where he sat—just a mass of feathery treetops—but as he knew it to be from having climbed that particular mountain."

Mrs. Lovett nodded. "He wants it to mean something more than just a view from a window. When other mountain climbers look at it, Neil hopes they'll remember their own struggles and the final exhilaration of reaching the summit."

"That's it exactly."

Steve began telling his mother about Rowdy, the war dog. He was a veteran of Okinawa; had been wounded twice. His master, a Marine, had been hospitalized with Neil and had given his dog to the boy.

"I shall go to see Neil and Rowdy," said Mrs. Lovett, moving across the kitchen with a pan of turnovers in her hands.

She had kept her youthful slenderness. Under her starched white apron she was wearing a pale pink morning dress that reflected its colour up into her singularly unlined face. Nobody knew better than Steve how difficult her life had been, and he marvelled at her ability to stay young and extract the joy from every moment. Though born to wealth, it had brought her no happiness. Her father had remarried shortly after his first wife's death. The stepmother was not fond of children so Mary was sent to live with her spinster aunt. Due to that lady's peculiarities, Mary grew up in a virtual prison. From the day Mary broke the bars and married, her aunt never spoke to her again. Her married life was happy, but it had lasted only a year.

Steve opened the oven door and his mother slid the pan in. Coffee was circulating on one part of the coal and wood range. She pushed it back, saying, "I'll wash up, Steve, then we'll go into the other room. I like to leave my kitchen tidy."

The woodbox needed replenishing. "I'll chop some wood for you before dinner," Steve said, as he followed her across the room. He stood by a window looking out. "I see your zinnias are still in bloom."

"Yes. Giants, aren't they? But how dry everything is! I wish it would rain for a month."

"Is it needed that bad?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, the farmers are beginning to worry. The wells are much lower than usual at this time of year."

"It's always something, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Yes. I suppose that's what keeps people on their toes."

When she had finished at the sink, she took off her apron and they went through a small, square hall into a long, sunny sitting room gay with flowered chintz and pots of begonias spilling colour over the wide window-sills.

Some years ago the six-room house and furnishings had been left Mrs. Lovett by a patient, an old lady whom she had nursed over a long period of time. Steve's mother was proud of her home and she kept it immaculate.

As they sat down Steve remarked, "Julie loved this place. She called it 'an adorable sugar cube of a house'."

"A good description of it," smiled his mother, "tucked away here at the end of this narrow lane."

Steve nodded, then, remembering Leslie's query, asked if his mother was ever lonely. She shook her head, softly quoting some favourite lines:

*"—in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild
We mortal millions live alone."*

"That's about the size of it," agreed Steve. He was sitting in a deep lounging chair, one leg flung over the arm. She offered him a bowl of apples. He took one, sank his teeth into the firm, juicy fruit, and with his eyes fixed on his mother's face murmured, "Blue as the lakes of Killarney."

"What are you talking about, Steve?" She had a pearl-handled fruit knife in her hand. She was peeling an apple with great care.

"Your eyes."

"Oh, bosh!"

"I'm only quoting."

She looked up quickly. "Quoting who?"

"A former ardent admirer of yours."

"Now, Steve, stop being mysterious."

He laughed, asking, "Do you remember Walter Denton when you were at the M.G.H.?"

"Leslie's uncle?" She drew her delicate brows together. "No. Should I?"

"It would be charitable," Steve said. "He was madly in love with you. Still is, I reckon."

"I don't believe it," she said, but Steve noticed that she looked

pleased. She ate a thin slice of apple, remarked that the fruit was excellent and that Steve must take some back to the hospital, then asked musingly, "Is Dr. Denton a short man with a wry neck?"

Steve burst out laughing.

"No."

"Then I'm afraid I can't place him."

"Poor Walter!"

A handsome black and white cat came into the room and vaulted lightly into Steve's lap. He buried his fingers in the soft thick fur. "Been catching any mice lately?"

"I never had a mouse here until I got Mickey," said Mrs. Lovett indignantly. "He brings them in alive just to show me what a smart fellow he is, and then they get away from him. Yesterday I saw a wrinkle in the dining room rug and when I investigated there was a dead mouse underneath."

"Nice going, fella." Steve rolled the cat over and rubbed its belly. He asked, "Shall I tell Walter you can't recall him?"

"Oh, Steve, of course not! Tell him I remember him as a most promising young man. Say that I . . . well, that I was always certain he'd be a success."

"Fibber," said Steve, his eyes twinkling.

The air was filled with the scent of coffee wafting in from the kitchen. Mrs. Lovett finished her apple, then stood up with a plate of apple peelings in her hand. She would bring in some coffee and doughnuts, she said. While she was out of the room, Steve put his head against the back of the chair and smoked, his gaze on a spider web stretched between two pine trees close to one of the windows. It was one of those beautiful and intricately woven designs. The sun was shining on it and the strands looked as strong and enduring as surgical wire.

How independent spiders were, he mused, spinning from their own bodies the webs which trapped the food which kept them alive. A good object lesson for man in the art of developing one's own abilities.

What was it Julie had said about the risk of losing his initiative if he joined a group?

He supposed that might be true, to a certain extent, but pooling knowledge was a valuable thing, too, wasn't it?

He was stroking the cat and thinking it over when his mother came back into the room carrying a tray on which were two steaming cups of coffee, sugar, cream, and a plate of sugared doughnuts.

She set the tray on a table between their chairs.

"So you finally met Dr. Denton?"

"Yes. I went to a cocktail party at his home."

"Did you like him?"

"Immensely. He'd be a good man to work for."

Steve was watching his mother's face as he spoke, half expecting her to voice some objection to his joining a clinic, but she said nothing against it and her face looked serene as she sat down and began to sugar her black coffee.

"Did you speak to him about it?" she asked, leaning back in her chair and crossing slender ankles.

"No," Steve said, "but I intend to write a letter of application. I couldn't seem to put it together by myself. I brought a rough draft and some hospital stationery. Will you give me a hand with it?"

"I'd be glad to."

A moment later Mrs. Lovett was asking Steve about his work at the hospital in which she was intensely interested. He told her what he had been doing of particular importance, mentioning, among other things, his emergency call on Mrs. Gillette.

"I'm proud of you, Steve," his mother said.

They smiled at each other.

"I had a caller yesterday," announced Mrs. Lovett, after a moment's silence. "Owen Everett dropped in."

"Yes?" Owen had been Steve's closest friend in college and in medical school. He now practised surgery in Portland. "How is Owen?"

"In perfect health, Steve."

"Came out of that brush with the U-boats pretty well, didn't he?" Owen had served in the European theatre.

"Yes."

"Did he look prosperous?" asked Steve, tweaking the cat's tail as the animal jumped from his lap.

"He looked as if he needed a wife," declared Steve's mother. "That suit of his! I made him take it off while I pressed it. And there were two buttons hanging by threads on his shirt."

"He cares less about clothes than I do," chuckled Steve, "and that's going some."

Mrs. Lovett had put her coffee cup aside. She was looking down fixedly at her neat white canvas shoes. There was a faint smudge on the toe of one and she rubbed at it with her handkerchief, saying, "Julie would make just the wife for Owen. We must bring them together."

"She'd make a good wife for any man," Steve said, "Julie has some sound ideas on the subject of marriage."

"You've discussed it with her?" asked Mrs. Lovett in a tone of surprise.

He grinned. "You'd be surprised at the ground we covered on the way up here." He reached for a doughnut, bit into it, and asked, "What was Owen doing in these parts?"

Owen had operated on a man who lived in Hiram, Mrs. Lovett explained. He wanted to see how his patient was progressing and while he was in the vicinity he'd dropped in on her.

"He's still eager for you to share an office with him, Steve."

"Is he?" Steve took out his handkerchief and wiped the sugar from his fingers. "We'd probably do all right together," he observed, "if I didn't have other plans. Did you mention the Denton Clinic to him?"

"Yes."

"What'd he say?"

Mrs. Lovett hesitated.

"Go on," Steve said, laughing, "I can take it."

"Well," said Mrs. Lovett slowly, "he said you were a victim of the times, afraid to strike out on your own." She added, "Owen's frank, you know."

"That's why I like the guy." Steve was not at all offended. "You know where you stand with him."

He remembered the healthy arguments he and Owen had had

in years gone by, the delight they had taken in ripping into each other's ideas, each stripping the other's viewpoint down to its bare skeleton yet never becoming angry in the process. They inevitably wound up their debates with a laugh and a handshake.

"I hope you don't think I agreed with Owen, Steve?" his mother said. She was stacking the dishes in her quick, deft way.

"Didn't you?"

"Certainly not."

"The last time we discussed clinics you were distinctly not in favour of them," he reminded lightly.

"I suppose I did give that impression, Steve, but I've been doing a lot of thinking since." Mrs. Lovett smoothed some wrinkles from the front of her dress and picked up the tray of dishes. "If socialized medicine comes, and it looks as if it might, you'd be rather fortunate, wouldn't you, to be connected with a good clinic?"

"I think so," Steve said, taking off his coat and hanging it over the back of the desk chair.

Mrs. Lovett nodded slowly.

"And about Leslie," she went on, looking earnestly at her son, "I expect she'll inherit her uncle's wealth and that might be a good thing for you, too." Somewhat startled, Steve asked why and his mother said, "You're interested in research and research takes a good deal of capital. If Leslie agreed to it I don't suppose you'd have any scruples against using her money to benefit humanity, would you? Under those circumstances, Steve, you might make some vastly important contribution that you couldn't possibly make if you went into practice by yourself. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"I believe Leslie's just the girl for you," his mother interrupted, "you must bring her to see me soon." Mrs. Lovett moved quickly towards the kitchen, saying over her shoulder. "We'll get started on that letter right away."

He eyed her disappearing figure curiously. Did she mean all she had been saying, or was it just that she wanted to impress upon him the fact that she had no intention of interfering with

his life? Having had to fight for her own rights, she was acutely sensitive concerning those of others.

He wasn't wholly in agreement with her over this—he didn't like the thought of using his wife's money, even for research—but he was greatly relieved to know that she had no objection to his marrying Leslie.

The day passed all too quickly, and driving back to the hospital with Julie the following morning it seemed to Steve as if he had had a most pleasant interlude in his work-crammed life. His mother approved of Leslie; the letter to Walter Denton, well composed and neatly typed, was in Steve's pocket sealed, stamped and ready to be dropped into the mailbox inside the hospital; Julie was a gay companion. It was not until he had dropped her off at the nurses' home and driven on that something occurred which took all the pleasure from his trip. He kept his car at the rear of the hospital and as he passed the front entrance a voice hailed him.

"Have a cosy weekend, you old fox?"

He turned his head sharply and saw Vincent Rhead standing outside the hospital smoking a cigarette. Vin had obviously seen Julie get out of the car and was drawing his own twisted conclusions.

Steve was in a disturbed frame of mind from then on.

He realized he must talk to Leslie before Vin did.

CHAPTER VII

As it turned out, it was three o'clock before Steve had an opportunity to telephone Leslie. As soon as he entered the hospital that morning the loud-speaker began to page him. It was Dr. Sylvester. He asked Steve to get the results of some tests which had been made on a patient and to call him back. Steve went up to the second floor and looked at the patient's chart. Only part of the

information was there, so Steve hurried down to the laboratory. The pathologist in charge, Dr. Greeson, had not yet come in but two technicians, little blonde Lena McCann and her sister, big, dark, hard-looking Nellie Graham, were there, clad in their white coats and sitting on opposite sides of a long table busy with their slides and microscopes.

They greeted him characteristically; Lena with a soft word and dimpled smile, Nellie with the silent contempt she seemed to feel for all men. When he asked about the tests on Dr. Sylvester's patient, Lena was flustered and apologetic because they hadn't gotten around to the work, but Nellie, shrugging her big, square shoulders, said sarcastically, "Oh, don't bother Lena! She has her mind on other things." Nellie added crossly, "We're shorthanded, anyway."

Two technicians had been absent for a week; one on vacation, the other ill at home.

Nellie was tired, Steve realized, but he suspected more behind her belligerent attitude than mere physical weariness. There was friction between the two sisters and it was having its effect on the laboratory work.

He left the room harbouring a feeling of apprehension. The laboratory was a vital part of the hospital. It had to function well or the patients ultimately suffered. The public was inclined to think of hospitals, mused Steve, principally in terms of the operating rooms, but every department was important. In his mind he likened the institution to the spider web he had seen stretched between the two pine trees in his mother's yard. If one strand became broken or even damaged, the unity and effectiveness of the whole was impaired.

Having reported to Dr. Sylvester, Steve went to his room and changed his clothes. He was busy for over an hour in the wards.

After that, with scarcely a break, he operated until two.

Two to three were visiting hours, and he was supposed to be at leisure in his room, but that morning he had promised to talk to the wife of a man with a bleeding ulcer. His appointment was for two-fifteen. The lady kept him waiting twenty minutes.

When she finally arrived he found her to be a high-strung, unreasonable woman with an abnormal appetite for social life. She acted as if she knew far more about her husband's case than Steve did. She argued against the quiet life Steve advocated, declaring that her husband would rather be dead than forced to live like that.

Trying to make her see reason, thought Steve, was like an attempt to pull a cat up a steep hill by its tail. Removal of the patient's ulcer seemed far less to the point than removal of the gentleman's wife. She won out, temporarily at least, and by the time Steve reached his room he felt limp as a pressed flower.

He stretched out on the bed and lit a cigarette. As he reached for the telephone he was thinking tenderly of Leslie, and the regular hours of the hoped-for clinic job presented all the advantages of a rest home.

He gave the number of Walter Denton's telephone to the operator, and then lay relaxed until he heard Jocelyn's English voice.

Steve explained who he was and inquired if Miss Townsend was at home.

"One moment, sir," said the butler.

While he waited, Steve's mind left the room and went downstairs to the laboratory. He had a suspicion that Vincent Rhead was in there edging up to pretty Lena. Vin ought to stay out of the lab during working hours unless he had business there. But to Vin, reflected Steve, his personal affairs were of paramount importance.

The nurses and hospital personnel were giving their annual dance about the middle of October, and Vin wanted to go without having to pay for his ticket. He was working on it, he had told Steve, with the intention of getting Lena to invite him.

Steve was watching a bird sway back and forth on the branch of a tree outside one of the windows when he heard Leslie's voice, coolly distant.

"Yes?"

A small, warning chill crept up his spine.

"It's Steve," he said heartily.

"Steve?" She acted as if he were some man she'd never heard of before, and by that he knew that the worst had happened—that while he'd been busy Vincent Rhead had talked to Leslie. "Oh, yes." Suddenly she seemed to remember him, but not as a person she particularly liked. "How are you?" she inquired with frosty politeness.

"Fine." He glared at the bird outside his window and as if it sensed the change in his feelings it teetered nervously for a moment, then flew away. "Did you enjoy your trip to New York?" he asked perfunctorily.

"Oh, yes," said Leslie. Her voice rose a bit. "Did you enjoy your trip to Maine?"

A discouraged sigh escaped him. He had intended to tell her the whole business from beginning to end—except about the letter he had written her uncle—and convince her that the trip was a thoroughly innocent one, but the tone of her voice was condemning him without a hearing, and in spite of his good intentions he felt resentment mounting within him. How could their marriage be happy if Leslie suspected him of wrongdoing whenever he was out of her sight?

He said stiffly, "Yes, it was a good trip."

"Especially the company, Steve?"

He waited a moment, in order to cool off.

"It wasn't planned, Leslie," he said at last.

"No?" She was exasperatingly cool but he could imagine her sitting at the telephone table tapping the rug with her foot. He wondered when Vin had called her, and how much time she had had to work up to this point. He wouldn't ask.

"You know I can't tell when things are going to break for me," he said patiently. "It happened right then and so I seized the opportunity. I hadn't any idea Julie was going to Maine until I saw her waiting at the bus stop."

"Did you feel obliged to pick her up, Steve?"

"No, but we do work in the same place."

"And you don't see quite enough of her?"

"I didn't feel any particular urge to have Julie with me," he explained. "It just seemed natural to give her a lift."

"I see," said Leslie.

She didn't see, he thought, his spirits sinking, at least not from his point of view. She was jealous and it seemed as if any mention of Julie's name injected some sort of poison into Leslie's ordinary healthy mind. He wondered briefly if she would feel better if he lied and said he and Julie had planned the trip together and now he was sorry because it had been a boring experience, and would Leslie forgive him if he promised never to step out of line again?

A woman's mind was something no man could, or should, attempt to understand, he decided wearily.

"Are you there, Steve?"

"Yes."

"I thought you'd died or something."

"No. I'm in excellent health."

"I presume the Maine air did you good?"

"It always does." He wouldn't lie, he decided, and he wouldn't grovel. "Look here," he said reasonably, "have I ever given you any real cause to doubt me?"

"Really, Steve, you're comical." Her laughter had no merriment in it. "That self-righteous tone!"

"Is this an improvement?" He endeavoured to inject a lighter, gayer note into his voice.

The wise thing, he told himself, was not to allow Leslie to irritate him to the point of a quarrel. There was nothing, after all, for them to quarrel about. His nerves were on edge, though—it had been a tough morning, all told—and he was aware of the need to control himself. His time was almost up here, and it was of great importance for him to keep on as even a keel as possible. If he let his personal life intrude anything might happen.

He shifted his position, saying, "I can explain when I see you, Leslie."

"So an explanation is in order, Steve?"

It took two to make a quarrel, he was thinking. "When can I take you to dinner, sweetheart?" he asked.

"Do you really want to, Steve?" Her voice sounded less strained.

"As soon as possible."

"I'm still your girl?" Her voice sounded wistful, childlike.

"You know you are," he assured tenderly.

Quick steps were coming down the corridor outside. He raised himself and nervously watched the door. He didn't want Vin to come in just as the icicles on the wire were beginning to melt. Whoever it was went by, and Steve lay back again with a sigh of relief.

"How about tonight?" Leslie was asking in a conciliatory tone.

He said regretfully, "I'm afraid I can't."

"Why not?" Her voice had cooled again.

"I promised to cover for Vin tonight."

"Oh."

"He relieved me over the weekend, so I have to return the favour," explained Steve.

"You *were* anxious to get to Maine while I was out of town, weren't you, Steve!"

He said nothing, being suddenly too tired to take up the cudgels again even in his own defence. He lay there with his eyes closed, waiting for Leslie to make the next move.

"Steve?"

"Yes."

"You're not very polite."

"What do you want me to do? Start another argument?"

She was silent for a moment, then countered with, "How did you find your mother?"

"In excellent health."

"Did you remember Uncle Walt to her?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She recalls him as a most promising young intern."

"You mean, I suppose, that she doesn't remember him at all?" Leslie sighed. "Poor Uncle Walt! But I won't tell him the truth. I'll pass the pretty lie on to him. He'll believe it and it'll make him feel that his life hasn't been in vain." Leslie paused, then asked, "Did your mother inquire for me?"

"Yes. She wants to meet you soon."

His arm was getting cramped from holding the receiver. He shifted it to his other hand and flexed the aching muscles.

"Did Julie meet your mother?" Leslie inquired.

He'd been hoping she wouldn't ask that, but he said at once, "Yes, they met."

"Was that necessary?"

"I don't suppose so." He felt uncomfortable. Leslie had him on the fence again.

"Did they take to each other, Steve?"

How did she expect him to answer? Did she want him to say that Julie and his mother hated each other on sight?

"They appeared congenial," he admitted, and then, "Let's cut this out, Leslie. How about dining with me tomorrow night?"

"I can't Steve. I have an engagement."

"Well, then . . ." he began.

"With Dick Kane," Leslie put in.

Ah, thought Steve, enter the crude gentleman with the bottled-in-bond look. The shoe was on the other foot now, and he was honest enough to admit that it pinched a bit. Feeling suddenly more kindly towards Leslie's suspicions of Julie, he said, speaking with what he hoped sounded like a show of altruism, "Enjoy yourself."

"I fully intend to," she replied.

"And save Wednesday night for me," Steve said.

"I don't know about that." Leslie spoke apologetically, but Steve wasn't quite sure that it was genuine. It sounded more to him as if she didn't intend to see him for quite a while as a matter of punishment. "I'll have to consult my engagement book," she told him.

"But I want to see you," he declared earnestly.

"I'll let you know," Leslie said noncommittally.

She broke the connection, and Steve hung up with the uneasy feeling that there was more difficulty ahead.

For several days, whenever the loud-speaker paged him, he went to the telephone hoping for the sound of Leslie's voice, but she failed to call and Steve finally decided that the foolish game

of hurt feelings must be terminated. If Leslie wouldn't clear the atmosphere, he must.

Then something happened which made him realize how deeply vexed she was.

CHAPTER VIII

On Friday, four days after his unsatisfactory conversation with Leslie, Steve was standing beside Vin while they scrubbed up for an operation. It was nearly noon. He decided that as soon as he was free he would swallow his pride and telephone Leslie. He regretted having waited so long.

Over the row of sinks hung a round-faced clock with black hands. As he glanced up at it to see how much of the required ten minutes' scrubbing time had been consumed, he wondered if Leslie had learned of his letter to Dr. Denton.

If so, what was her reaction?

Having five more minutes in which he must cleanse hands and arms, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and watched the soap bubbles appear and disappear.

"At it again," muttered Vin. He was referring to Greta Maddison, the new operating room supervisor. Above the running water they could hear her nasal voice raised in argument. She was a tall, sallow brunette in her mid-thirties; a former sergeant in the Army. She appeared to think that doctors and nurses were people to command rather than to co-operate with.

"Listen to the battle-axe," went on Vin. "She's lazy as they come. Have you noticed? Does her best to slow the crew down."

Steve nodded. "How long do you suppose she'll last?"

"Oh, she won't be the one to go." The light from a window shone across Vin's handsome, frowning countenance. "She has a drag. Cousin of one of the Executive Committee that acts for the Trustees, I understand. You know what that means."

"Yes." There was a small abrasion on Steve's right hand which

had come from the bursting of a blister. He winced as he scrubbed it, then expressed the opinion that authority in the hands of one like Gretta Maddison was as dangerous as a stick of dynamite.

Vin agreed as he winked at a pretty student nurse moving towards one of the operating rooms with a package of sterile goods. "Penurious as the devil, too," he observed. "Cutting down on supplies left and right. Says it's because she wants to save money for the hospital, but if you ask me it's just another way of showing her authority. That was a fine mess she got Zeller into this morning."

"Yes," murmured Steve.

It was a major operation in which the anaesthetist was to give a spinal. He was inserting the needle when the point of it broke off. That made it necessary to send the patient to be X-rayed. The tip of the needle had to be removed before the operation could proceed. The surgeon was Brian McCormick. He stormed around the operating room, blaming the incident on the anaesthetist. It was a sickening exhibition of temper during which Dr. Zeller stood silently at a window with his back turned to the room and his head bowed. Steve could have stayed out of it, but McCormick's tirade went so against his grain that he made a point of finding out where that needle had come from. It proved to be one of poor quality purchased during the war when good material was hard to get. They were all supposed to have been thrown away, one of the nurses recalled, but evidently Gretta Maddison had unearthed a package somewhere and, though it was plainly marked "Inferior," she had given one of the needles to the unsuspecting anaesthetist.

"Maddison looked as if she'd like to stick a knife in your ribs, Steve," Vin was saying.

Steve shrugged.

"She's down on everybody."

"Especially Julie," remarked Vin. "Julie's too good at her job. She makes it hard for Maddison to loaf. Those two are going to bat some day. I hope I'm around."

Steve made no reply. He had noted the growing tension between independent Julie and the contentious supervisor. It

worried him. He knew that Julie wished to stay at the Springville Hospital, and he was further disturbed because something he couldn't put his finger on seemed to have disrupted the friendliness which had existed between Julie and himself.

He knew that she was deliberately avoiding him and, even when they were alone, he had become "Dr. Lovett" again.

Furthermore, when he had sought her out yesterday to say that his mother had dropped in on Neil and Rowdy, taking along a cake, a pie, and a bone, Julie had appeared more upset than pleased.

"I appreciate it, Dr. Lovett," Julie had murmured, "but I don't want people going out of their way to help my brother."

The words and the way she said them were like a slap in the face.

He couldn't figure it out unless it was the result of something malicious Vin might have said.

"Oh, by the way," there was a note of triumph in Vin's voice, "I'm crashing the gates of the castle Sunday night. Leslie's invited me to a buffet supper."

There was a pause during which Steve turned off the faucet and moved a few paces to plunge hands and arms into a solution of disinfectant. Retaliation, he thought. Leslie intended to show him how unimportant he was to her. He stood for a moment, gazing down at his fingers, pink and abnormally fat as seen through the liquid, and listening to the soft hiss of steam from the sterilizing room. Then he spoke calmly.

"Now you'll find out what the place looks like."

It was an ill wind that blew nobody good, he reflected. Vin might hear something from Leslie about that letter to Dr. Denton and pass the information on to Steve.

Rhead appeared a trifle disappointed.

"Aren't you jealous?"

"No." Steve forced himself to smile. "Get Leslie to take you to the tower room," he advised. "The view is worth seeing."

Vin let out one of his irritatingly high laughs.

"Magnanimous, aren't you?"

"I don't own Leslie," said Steve quietly.

"She might be interested to know how you feel." There was a mean look around Vin's mouth.

Steve was aware of tightened nerves, but his face showed nothing.

He removed his hands from the disinfectant and clasped them together, saying evenly, "You make rather a speciality of keeping Leslie informed, don't you?"

Vin shrugged and said nothing.

Steve was careful not to mention Leslie's name again to Vin, and on Sunday when Rhead was dressing to go out, Steve made a point of busying himself in the library. He was awake, however, when Vin came in at two o'clock. He lay in the dark, waiting for the lights to go on, and wondering whether, in Vin's obviously incriminated condition, he could pump any worth-while information from him.

The room remained in darkness, however.

Steve could hear Rhead moving awkwardly around, swearing beneath his breath when he knocked over a chair, and laughing once as if he remembered something funny. He had brought in with him a mingled odour of Scotch, cigar smoke, and perfume.

Steve thought, what a head he'll have tomorrow, but in the morning Vin bounced out of bed looking as if somebody had left him a million dollars with no strings attached.

"It must have been quite a party," commented Steve, as they dressed on opposite sides of the room.

"And how, brother, and how!" Vin was smiling mysteriously as if he had put something over on somebody. Had Leslie taken him to the music room and exhibited affection? wondered Steve. No, he decided, she wouldn't go that far, but why did Vin look like a cat after a catnip drunk?

"How was the food?" inquired Steve presently.

You had to go the long way around when Rhead was in his I-know-and-you-don't mood.

"Lavish," answered Vin.

"I don't need to inquire about the liquor," said Steve.

"Oh, I know I was a little on the bleary side," replied Vin, laughing. He was shaking the wrinkles from the suit he had worn

the night before. He looked it over carefully for spots, found one and stood scratching at it with his fingernail. "I wasn't so fox'd with strong drink, though, that I couldn't do myself a pretty slick turn while I was there," he boasted.

Obviously, Vin had something he considered important up his sleeve. Had he approached Walter Denton on the subject of a clinic job and been encouraged? Leslie knew Vin was a good surgeon. Had she put in a word for him?

Though filled with curiosity, Steve knew better than to appear unduly interested. In shorts and stocking feet he strolled to the window and stood looking out. There had been frost the night before and the early morning sun was showing up the red and yellow leaves in the patch of woods beside the hospital. Off-handedly Steve asked, "How did you like Walter Denton?"

"He wasn't there," said Vin.

"No?" Steve turned from the window, walked to his bed, sat down and began to put on his shoes. "Where was he?"

"He's on one of his trips," explained Rhoad.

A trip. That might be the reason, thought Steve, why he had not yet had an answer to his letter.

"How long has he been gone?"

"I wouldn't know." Vin had swept aside the battery of photographs on the top of his bureau, and was standing with a comb in his hand looking at his reflection in the mirror while he carefully pressed a deep wave into the hair above his left temple. "He makes these trips semi-annually, according to Leslie." Vin stood back to view his handiwork. "Visits colleagues in different cities, so she says, and pops in on other clinics to see what's cooking. This time he'd gone out through the Middle West. She says he has cases referred to him from way out there." Vin added enviously, "The lucky stiff!"

"When's he expected home?"

"A week or ten days."

Well, mused Steve, he could stop worrying about that letter for a while.

Apparently pleased with his reflection, Vin gave himself one last lingering look, then began to put on his trousers.

"It would be a joke if I stole a patient right from under Denton's nose, wouldn't it?" he commented, his lips parted in a mischievous grin.

"Wake up," advised Steve good-naturedly.

"I'm not dreaming, brother. I made a hit there last night and don't you forget it. Ever meet a Mrs. Gardner, a coy, plump widow with a bunch of kale and a chronic appendix?"

"Yes, I've met her."

"She told me all about herself," said Vin, eyes gleaming. "All her friends have had operations, and she'd just love to have one but she can't endure clinics. She thinks they're comparable to bargain basements," Vin threw back his head and laughed. "Wouldn't Walter like to hear that?"

"I don't imagine she'd get much of a bargain at the Denton Clinic," Steve said, smiling.

"You bet your sweet life she wouldn't, but that isn't what bothers her. She's been there for observation and apparently they wouldn't knuckle to her. She's the sort who demands a lot of personal attention from her physician. After a few slugs of Scotch I had her practically sold on the idea that I was the doctor to give it to her."

"And just where do you think you'd operate?" asked Steve.

"Here."

"You have a lot of nerve, Vin."

Rhead was choosing a necktie from several dozen which hung on a rack screwed into one end of his bureau. He selected a maroon-coloured one with beige stripes, laid it aside, and then lighted a cigarette with a flourish.

"You need nerve to get anywhere. I could charge her a thousand dollars and she wouldn't bat an eyelash."

"Nice way to slam the door of the Denton Clinic in your own face," remarked Steve.

Vin took a quick turn around the room, scattering ashes as he went.

"I'm not fooling myself," he said sharply. "I haven't a ghost of a show with the clinic or with Leslie, either, so I'm going to grab while the grabbing's good." He moved briskly to the

closet, took out his white jacket and began to put it on. "I've been shy on cash all my life," he went on. "If I put this over I can buy myself some clothes, and maybe take a little cruise somewhere when I finish up here. Nassau ought to be nice in April."

Steve looked fixedly at the other man. "You aren't really serious?"

"Never more so, Steve."

"Since when have residents been allowed to have private patients?" questioned Steve. He was amazed at Rhead's audacity.

"Do you know any written rule against it?" demanded Vin.

"No, I can't say I do, but the staff would object. You know that."

They were dressed. They went out together into the corridor.

"That for the staff," murmured Vin, bringing his thumb impudently to his nose for an instant. "I could do her early in the morning and have her off the table and back into bed before any of the big shots appear. Steve . . ."

"What?"

"You'll be a good sport and watch over my shoulder, won't you?"

"What do you mean? Assist you?"

"Yes."

"No," said Steve abruptly. He didn't believe Vin would get the case, but he wanted to state his own views clearly anyway. "You can definitely count me out, Vin."

CHAPTER IX

On October 17th, at ten o'clock in the morning, Steve was in the X-ray room on the ground floor of the hospital bending over some plates when he felt a hand touch him on the shoulder.

A voice with a pronounced Maine twang asked, "D'you know where I can locate a guy with an ugly mug, name of Lovett?"

Steve straightened up and swung around, lips wide in a grin of welcome.

"Owen, you old son-of-a-seacock, how are you?"

"Never better, Steve." The two shook hands heartily, then Owen rocked back on his heels, the deep-socketed eyes above his prominent cheekbones scrutinizing Steve closely. "But you don't look so hot," he announced frankly. "What are they doing to you here?"

Steve was aware of having lost weight, but he laughed.

"Feeding me plenty of work which is exactly what I want."

"Sure," agreed Owen in a voice that seemed to come from his heels, "but, man, there's a limit."

"How would you know about that? Hearsay?"

Owen Everett was a glutton for work.

"I'm planning to take life easy when I get a partner," Owen said.

"Got the chap picked yet?" inquired Steve innocently.

"You're the one, Steve."

"Did you come all the way from Portland to say that, Owen?"

"Not exactly, but I enjoy getting it off my chest."

Steve laughed as he took Owen across the room and introduced him to Whitman, the slight, fair-haired roentgenologist. The three talked together for a few minutes, then Steve and Owen departed. Barring emergencies, Steve was free for half an hour.

"Come up to my quarters where we can talk," he said.

"I was hoping you'd say that, Steve."

As they walked down a corridor towards the elevators, Steve inquired about the report he had heard that there were more than forty forest fires burning in Maine. He guessed it was true, said Owen, but they were small blazes. He didn't think there was anything particular to worry about. The woods had been closed to hunters and that was a wise precaution.

"How are you doing professionally?" Steve asked his friend.

"I can't complain," said Owen. He added, "No mortalities of late, I'm happy to say."

A good-looking nurse was bearing down upon them and Owen, who was carrying his felt hat in his hand, reached up to tidy his thatch of black hair. In size, he was a young giant. The nurse smiled up at him as she sailed by and Owen turned, craning his neck, to look after her.

"Don't you have any pretty nurses in Portland?" asked Steve, amused.

"I guess so, but I have no time to see them there."

"Well," said Steve, "here comes another. Make the most of your opportunity." He added, "Why aren't you practising medicine today?"

Owen explained that he had attended a medical meeting in Boston the night before, bunked with a friend at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, and then decided to do the thing up brown by dropping in on Steve.

They happened at the moment to be passing the door of the admitting office. There was talking going on in there and they both glanced in. Vincent Rhead was sitting on the corner of a desk chatting gaily with a dark girl in a green smock who was sitting before a typewriter. Just as they moved by, Vin reached over and put his hand on the girl's.

"Still playing the great lover, is he?" muttered Owen, who had no use for Vin.

"Yes."

They had reached the elevator. Steve pressed the button and while they stood waiting, he remembered a recent incident in the laboratory. It was yesterday afternoon. He had gone in for a report and found Nellie there alone, sitting hunched up on her stool.

"What do you want now?" she asked rudely as she lifted her head and looked at him.

Steve made his request.

"The report's not ready yet," she said shortly.

"All right, Nellie, no offence intended. Where's Lena?"

"I'll tell you where she is." Nellie made a sound as if she were

grinding her teeth. "She's in the wash-room again, bawling her eyes out."

"What for?" he asked sympathetically.

Nellie half-rose from her stool and reached for a test tube. It slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor, breaking into a myriad of small pieces. She stared at the glittering heap for a moment, then sat down heavily as if her strength had suddenly deserted her. Lena was getting the brush-off, she said bitterly. Dr. Rhoad had been coming into the lab for weeks, making up to Lena, until he had her believing that he was crazy about her. Lena'd even had her photograph taken especially for him. And the dance everybody was talking about, went on Nellie growing angrier with every word she uttered, the one the nurses and hospital personnel were giving next Saturday night—well, the tickets were four dollars apiece and Lena'd bought two and Dr. Rhoad had promised to go with her, and then suddenly he'd begun to hedge saying he was afraid he couldn't make it.

"He's going all right," fumed Nellie, "but he's taking that scrawny brunette from the admitting office. The one with the cast in her eye. I don't know what he has up his sleeve, but he's got something, and whatever it is he's breaking Lena's heart." Nellie had big, well-shaped hands. Steve saw her fingers flex, then straighten slowly as she reached out towards a jar of alcohol in which a specimen was floating. "I'd like to teach that guy a lesson," she muttered.

Steve thought he knew what Vin's game was but he said nothing of it to Nellie.

The elevator stopped and they got in and went up to Steve's room. Steve plucked his pyjamas and Vin's from the one comfortable chair and told Owen to sit down. Owen chucked his hat on to Steve's bed and settled himself, elevating his big feet to the edge of a table.

They lit cigarettes while Owen stared at the array of pretty girls on Vin's bureau.

"It's a gift," he remarked at last. "Well, life will catch up with him some day."

It was warm in the room. Steve opened the windows and

killed a fly that was circling lazily around. He put a green glass ashtray on the floor beside Owen's chair.

"Yes, sir," said Owen, his coal-black eyes gleaming, "the candle of the wicked shall be put out."

Through his light cyclashes, Steve looked affectionately at his friend. Owen was a minister's son. He quoted proverbs and scripture as naturally as other men spoke of the weather.

"That doesn't always follow, Owen."

"Sooner or later it does," insisted Owen. "What have you got to cat, if anything?"

Steve opened a bureau drawer and took out a red tin box half filled with fancy cookies which had been presented to him by a patient.

"Help yourself."

Owen took half a dozen and began to munch contentedly.

"So you're making out well, are you?" asked Steve.

Yes, said Owen in a tone of satisfaction, work was really beginning to come his way. Two general practitioners in the city and one outside were referring cases to him. He'd operated three times last week. Double hernia, acute appendix, stone in the kidney. All alive and doing well.

"That's great," said Steve.

Owen reached for more cookies. Presently he said. "What have you got against sharing an office with me, Steve?"

"Not a thing, old man, but I've made different plans."

"Nothing settled yet, is it?"

"No," admitted Steve.

"Well, then, we can at least discuss the proposition." Owen smiled and sat for a moment stroking a jaw which looked as if it had been squared off with a ruler. Then he brought his feet down to the floor and leaned towards Steve, elbows on his knees and hands clasped together. "Here's the setup. I know of a good-sized office we could rent in a fairly new building occupied by professional men. Excellent location, good parking space in the rear, and handy to the various hospitals where we'd be working. The present tenant is giving up his lease and I have an option on the office."

Owen took a pencil from his pocket and began to draw a diagram on the back of an envelope.

"Nice and light, Steve, four windows, plenty of room for two desks, some chairs, a couch, and even a fern if we want to go that far." He glanced up from the diagram, grinned boyishly, looked down again and went on, "There's a dandy little examining room on the left and a two by four space which we could fit up nicely as a lab." Owen paused, chewed the end of his pencil for a moment, then continued, "Oh, yes, and there's a decent-sized waiting room where an office nurse could sit in her spare time and give a good impression by reading high-class literature."

Steve said, "It sounds good, Owen, but . . ."

"I wouldn't go into double harness with anybody but you," interrupted Owen. "You and I complement each other, Steve. We discovered that long ago." He returned the pencil and envelope to his pocket. He was deeply in earnest, Steve realized. "We're the same generation," Owen pointed out, "so it wouldn't be a case of an older man dragging a younger one along or vice versa." He leaned forward again, eyes fixed entreatingly on Steve's face. "We could sweat out our diagnoses together and assist each other. In that way we'd double our experience. Furthermore, we could take alternate weekends off, giving each of us time to study, or fish, or ski, or do whatever appealed individually."

"It makes a mighty pretty picture," admitted Steve, "but I'm afraid it's out of the question."

"Don't decide yet," said Owen quickly, "plenty of time for you to mull it over. That's all I ask. Just give it some real thought."

Steve said inflexibly, "I believe I know what I want."

"You want what all of us do, Steve," Owen smiled. "Work and peace of mind, but would you be satisfied not to be your own boss? I doubt it. Clinic life looks like a comfortable living but, man, you want more than that from life."

Steve made no reply and Owen continued with great earnestness, "The challenge of independence was never so great. They're trying mighty hard to make us all of a piece. You hear loud,

scornful laughter at the expense of the man who dares to be himself but, holy mackerel, Steve, that's what *made* this country and that's the only state of mind that will put it back on its feet." Owen paused to light a cigarette, then went on, "We're all afraid of what the future holds, and when people are fearful they instinctively herd. In this man's opinion the time was never so ripe to step away from the crowd and stand by your guns."

Steve murmured agreement and glanced at his watch. He still had some spare time. He got up and turned on a table radio, hoping for a late news flash that would tell him something about the Maine fires. After listening for a moment to a commentator discussing world problems, Steve silenced the radio.

"Now how did that happen?" Owen was saying as he searched through his pockets. "I was sure I had some more cigarettes."

"Don't let that worry you," Steve took a package from a drawer and tossed it.

Owen's long arm shot up. He caught the package in mid air.

"Nice friends I have." Owen smiled as his big fingers worked at the cellophane enclosing the package. With a quick look up under his bristling brows, he asked unexpectedly, "How's Julie?"

Steve stared at him. "What do you know about Julie?"

"I've been given to understand she'd make me a fine wife," grinned Owen.

"So you've been calling on my mother again?" laughed Steve.

"No, she called on me," said Owen. "She was in Portland the other day buying a new hose and she came around to see me. Washed my office windows while she was there, bless her. Brought me a mince pie, too, and a dozen of her grand doughnuts. What a woman! Say, Steve," Owen's voice became suddenly plaintive, "would you object too strenuously to having me for a stepdad? I'd be good to you, boy."

Steve laughed, then sobered quickly. A new hose? Then his mother was worried about the fires.

"You can laugh," said Owen, "but I've been in love with that

woman for years and years." The big young man gave a tragic sigh. "And I do need a helpmate. Your mother said so herself."

"And suggested Julie?"

"Well, not in so many words, but she had so much praise for Julie that my mouth's been watering ever since. Is she really such a humdinger?"

"You can judge for yourself," said Steve, "if you want to stick around awhile."

"You'll introduce her to me?" Owen fingered his dark blue tie expectantly.

Steve nodded. He was helping John Sylvester take out half a stomach at eleven o'clock, he explained, and Julie would be running the instrument table. If Owen wanted to wait and see the show—

"Do I?" Owen got up quickly, rubbing his hands together with anticipation. "Half a stomach, eh? Give me a quick resume of the case, Steve."

Talking earnestly, Steve ushered his friend out. On the way down to the operating room they discussed the coming operation. Once there, John Sylvester welcomed Owen cordially. They had met before. "Imagine his remembering me," said Owen as he got into gown, cap and mask. He stood, an entranced spectator, while the surgeon and his team performed the difficult operation.

Julie was superb.

When it was over, Owen looked worshipfully at John Sylvester, saying in his deep voice, "I won't forget this in a hurry, doctor. It was a real education."

"Glad you came," said Dr. Sylvester. "Visit us whenever you can."

Owen watched the great man leave the room.

"What technique, Steve, and he's a human being as well. You don't always find that combination. You worked magnificently with him."

"Thanks," murmured Steve. He was watching Julie, waiting for a chance to introduce her to Owen.

"How does Sylvester feel about you going into a clinic?"

asked Owen, moving quickly out of the way of Gretta Maddison who was crossing the operating room with the regulation Army stride, a frown on her sharp-featured face.

"I haven't discussed it with him," answered Steve. "I want you to meet Dr. Zeller, Owen." The anaesthetist was pottering around a large tank of oxygen, examining the cocks. "But don't offer to shake hands with him."

"Why not?"

"Both of his were broken by the Nazis."

"Barbarians!" muttered Owen, thrusting his own hands behind him as if he were ashamed of them.

Owen and the Austrian talked together for a few minutes. There seemed to be mutual liking between them. When Steve saw that Julie was about to leave the room, he said, "Excuse us, Dr. Zeller," and as he led Owen off he was aware of a faint twinkle lighting the dark sombreness of Johann Zeller's eyes.

Julie had moved quickly. She was half-way down the corridor, headed towards the nurses' lockers when Steve called. She halted, turned, hesitated for a moment as if uncertain what she should do, then came slowly back.

Watching her as she came, Owen murmured, "Your mother was right, Steve, and I might add that goods which please are half sold."

"Imbecile," muttered Steve.

He introduced the two. Owen took Julie's small hand in his enormous one and looked down smilingly from his great height at her.

"You did a grand job handling those instruments."

"Thanks, Dr. Everett, but I had help."

"Help? You call that scared-rabbit of a student nurse help? You had to carry her along. That was plain. Why didn't they give you what you needed for a job like that?"

Julie's dimple made a brief appearance.

"I'm in the doghouse," she whispered.

"You don't mean that was intentional?" growled Owen. "You aren't intimating that that female hammer thrower who was running the room foisted that student on you?"

"A slight case of hospital politics, Owen," explained Steve. "Julie is too competent for her own safety."

"So that's the way it is." Owen nodded wisely. He was still holding fast to Julie's hand. "I have a job for you," he told her, "provided things get too complicated around here. That is," Owen added, "if you'd consider being my office nurse."

"Where?" asked Julie, her eyes bright.

"The best spot on earth. Portland, Maine."

"Portland?" Her eyes widened. She stared up at Owen, thought Steve, as if the latter were a god from Olympus. "I might take you up on that," she said thoughtfully.

"Well, keep it in mind," urged Owen.

Julie said she would. Then she got her hand back from Owen, and moved off down the corridor.

"A very touching scene," remarked Steve. He was a little hurt. Julie had scarcely glanced at him. It had all been for Owen.

"What are you grouching for?" asked Owen good-naturedly. "You've got a girl."

Steve did not reply. His eyes were on Julie's small, straight back. All at once, as if she felt his gaze, she turned and waved. Then she disappeared.

"Was that for me or for you?" asked Owen.

"Both of us, I guess," said Steve.

He didn't know why, but that little wave from Julie had somehow re-established their friendly relationship. She had smiled along with it, and it was the first real smile he had had from her in days.

He clapped Owen on the shoulder.

"Come downstairs and I'll buy you some lunch."

"Now you're talking," said Owen happily.

CHAPTER X

Steve had bought a ticket to the hospital dance, but when the evening came he was so delayed in getting started that he finally decided not to go. His nightly visit through the wards had been prolonged by several unexpected incidents and then he was called to the accident room to treat a fireman for smoke inhalation and cuts. An intern could have done it, but all the interns were busy or at the dance so Steve treated the patient, meanwhile receiving such a graphic description of uncontrolled flames rushing through woods that it made him newly apprehensive for the safety of his mother and Julie's brother, Neil.

He was passing the laboratory, which was next to the accident room, when he noticed a light burning in there. Dr. Greeson, the energetic young pathologist, often stayed late to catch up on work, and Steve decided to offer him his ticket to the dance in case Dr. Greeson felt like going.

With this in mind he opened the door of the laboratory and went in. To his surprise Nellie was there, the sole occupant of the room.

In her black skirt and white coat, Nellie sat humped up on a stool looking through a microscope at something on a slide. A pile of papers lay beside her.

The room was dark except for the circle of light in which Nellie sat.

"What are you doing here this time of night?" asked Steve, closing the door quietly and advancing into the room.

Before she answered, Nellie withdrew the yellow pencil from her hair and wrote something down on a slip of paper. Then she raised a pair of hollow-looking eyes and gave Steve a sullen glance.

"What do I appear to be doing?"

"Burning the midnight oil. Is it necessary?"

"It's a habit of yours, isn't it?" snapped Nellie.

She was in one of her contrary moods, but there was something

pathetic about her that touched him as it never had before. She looked so spiritually alone, he reflected, as if there was nobody on earth to whom she could stretch out a hand if she needed to.

He wanted her to feel that he was her friend, so he pulled a stool up opposite her and sat down.

"Do we pile it on you like that, Nellie?" he asked gently. How her shoulders must ache from that position in which she had been sitting all day and evening!

She shrugged but did not answer, and presently Steve took a package of cigarettes from his pocket and held it out.

"Smoke?"

He was thinking that even five minutes' relaxation would help the strain on her eyes and the muscles at the back of her neck.

"Sure." Nellie reached out and he observed that her hand was shaking. He struck a match for her.

"You're all in. You ought to be in bed."

"I'm not asking for sympathy," frowned Nellie.

"That's plain horse-sense," he told her amiably. He believed she was here because she felt she must do Lena's work as well as her own. "Don't you go to dances, Nellie?" he inquired, all at once aware that he had never encountered her at any of the social events promoted by the hospital.

"No, I don't." She inhaled, then blew smoke in Steve's direction as if she wanted to drive him out.

The tales about her early marriage and desertion must be true, decided Steve. Somewhere along the line Nellie had lost all faith in human nature. You could sum up her philosophy in three bitter words, he mused—don't trust anybody.

"Did Lena go to the dance?" he ventured.

There was a tightening of Nellie's facial muscles, and for a minute he thought she was on the point of telling him to mind his own business and get out, but then suddenly she leaned one elbow on the table and sunk her cheek into her hand, saying in the most disheartened voice he had ever heard, "Yes, she went, the crazy little fool."

Steve was aware that Vin had taken Teresa Earle, the girl in the admitting office, to the dance. Very quietly, Teresa had booked

Vin's patient, Rhea Gardner, to come into the hospital the following Monday afternoon. Vin couldn't run any risks now, thought Steve. He had to play up to Teresa until after the operation.

Wondering how much Nellie actually knew of what was going on, he asked. "Why do you call your sister a fool?"

"Because she is one." Nellie straightened up and jerked at the collar of the white blouse she was wearing beneath her coat. "I can't see myself getting all dolled up in a new dress and going to a dance alone to sit and be ignored by a . . . by a . . ."

She paused, evidently unable to conjure up a bad enough name for Vin, and Steve put in gently, "Snake in the grass, Nellie?"

He was as sorry for bitter Nellie as he was for jilted Lena.

"Worse than that," muttered Nellie, glowering. "Somebody ought to teach that Don Juan a lesson. He gets away with murder and nobody lifts a finger to stop him."

Steve got up slowly, his cigarette burning between his lips. Bed would have to wait, he decided. He was going to the dance after all. He would look in on it, anyway, and if Lena needed him, he'd stay a reasonable length of time. The little, soft-eyed blonde technician wasn't cut out to be a wallflower.

Over on one side of the laboratory, water was dripping slowly from a faucet into a sink. He listened to it for a moment, watching Nellie's hand tremble as she extinguished her cigarette, then, borrowing for the occasion from his friend, Owen, he said lightly, "Cheer up, Nellie, the candle of the wicked shall be put out."

"Don't give me that," muttered Nellie.

"Don't you believe in retribution?"

She said nothing, but made an impatient movement of her head as if reminding him that she wished to be left alone. He said good night and left the room, thinking as he went out that he'd hate to be on Nellie's black list.

Half an hour later he stepped into the dance hall and stood looking around, his eyes searching for Lena. The hall was gaily decorated with red, yellow, and blue paper streamers. At one

end a three-piece orchestra, seated on a raised platform, was playing a waltz. Beyond some potted palms, at the other end of the room, there was a table covered by a white cloth. On it stood a huge punch bowl filled with purp'ish liquid. About twenty couples were dancing, and seated along one wall were four older women acting as chaperons. They were Elizabeth Douglas, the efficient hawk-eyed superintendent of nurses; Mrs. Daley, a plump, pleasant seamstress from the housekeeping department; Glenda Rodney, the capable but gossipy head dietitian; and the hard-working nurses' aid Steve liked so much, Mrs. Wetherill.

Mrs. Wetherill saw him and waved. He waved back, wishing he could go over and ask her to dance, but he had come expressly for the purpose of rescuing Lena. Suddenly he located her sitting alone in a far corner of the room.

She was dressed in glistening white. Her buttercup-yellow hair was swept up on each side of her chalk-white face and held back by tiny combs. Her small hands in white lace evening mitts were locked together in her lap. Her face wore a stricken look as her blue eyes followed the progress around the hall of Vincent Rhead and Teresa Earle, the latter in glaring pink.

The music stopped; applause began. Steve made his way to where Lena was sitting. She looked, he thought, as if she were slowly dying from some internal, fatal disease which had not yet begun to make inroads on her outer loveliness.

He seated himself beside her.

"Hello, Lena."

She turned her head and looked at him blankly, saying nothing, then her eyes went hunting for Vin and Teresa. The musicians were smoking, and Vin had marshalled Teresa over to the table where the punch bowl stood. He was ladling some of the purplish liquid out while Teresa giggled and pressed her shoulder against his.

"You shouldn't wear your heart on your sleeve, honey," admonished Steve in a low voice. "People are noticing."

A small, warning chill crept up his spine.

"It's Steve," he said heartily

"I don't care." Lena's voice was an agonized whisper. "I invited him to go to the dance and he accepted, and then he backed out and took her."

"He had other fish to fry, Lena."

She didn't reply. She was in an emotionally desperate condition. Lena was sensitive, thought Steve, and she was suffering as only that sort of a girl could under these circumstances. She had probably let Vin caress her, she had certainly listened to his soft whisperings. She had trusted him implicitly. And now this.

Steve sought in his mind for words to comfort her.

"He's not worthy of you, Lena."

She looked at him and her tragic eyes said it didn't matter whether Vin was worthy of her or not. She was in love.

"What did I do?" she asked, half sobbing. "What did I do to make him turn against me?"

"Nothing, Lena. He gives his favours where they'll do him the most good."

If Lena heard that she gave no indication. Steve felt like telling her the whole story of Vin and the rich widow, Rhea Gardner, but he decided it was better left untold. She would know soon enough.

The clapping for an encore began. Steve got up, straightening his tie and buttoning his blue serge jacket.

"Our dance, Lena."

She shook her head quickly. He knew she wanted to be left alone, but she was going to pieces fast and it was up to him to do something about it. He took hold of her hands and made her stand up. He drew her gently into his arms.

Her grace was the grace of a leaf floating through the air. He scarcely felt her weight at all as he guided her around the room, careful to keep his distance from Rhead and the girl in pink.

He would dance with Lena a few times, he decided, meanwhile talking to her like a Dutch uncle, then he'd see her home and ultimately get to bed at a fairly civilized hour.

"Vincent doesn't like me any more," Lena spoke in the voice

of a bewildered child. She stared up into Steve's face, her mouth tragic. "Is she a lot prettier than I am?"

"Use your eyes, Lena." He held the small figure closer to him. "She's homely as sin, poor girl, and if it's any comfort to you, Vin isn't enjoying himself."

Lena's lips quivered.

"Why doesn't he ask me for a dance?"

"I should think you'd be glad he hasn't, Lena. It's good riddance to bad rubbish, if you ask me."

She gasped suddenly.

"I feel sick. I think I'm going to faint."

She mustn't collapse in his arms, thought Steve with alarm. The other girls were watching her—some with pity, some with amusement, according to their different natures. A fainting scene would focus the attention of everybody in the room on poor little Lena. "Hang on," he said. Holding her tightly and changing his direction, he danced her towards the door. To the left of the hall there was a powder room. He said, "Go in there, Lena, and pull yourself together. I'll wait for you."

She fled from his arms. His throat was dry. He walked over to the table where the bowl of punch was. It was warmish and insipid and his guess was that the real punch, that with a stick in it, was hidden somewhere from the eyes of the chaperons. He would have liked a drink of that but Lena was on his mind; her trembling and the dreadful whiteness of her face. She and Nellie lived in a boarding house near the hospital, and he decided now that he would take Lena home at once. Nellie would probably be there by this time, and he'd tell her to give Lena a bromide and put her to bed.

Poor kid.

He went back to the entrance of the hall and was standing there with his eye on the door of the powder room when he heard feet running up the stairs from the street level. A voice called softly but urgently, "Steve, oh Steve." He swung around, took a few strides and found himself facing Julie.

She was wearing a formal gown of pale blue and silver, an off-the-shoulder model with small, puffed sleeves and a full

ballerina skirt. She had a white wrap over her arm; a gardenia highlighted her smooth dark hair just above her left ear. No mascara, he noticed and the minimum of rouge and lipstick. She was so lovely that Steve was aware of a quickening of his pulse. He thought he had never seen a prettier picture than Julie made standing before him in the subdued light with her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted.

He realized that she was upset, and he asked quickly what was the matter.

She was worried about Lena McCann, Julie told him in a carefully guarded voice, the little blonde technician from the laboratory. She, Julie, had found the dance hall stuffy and had gone down for a breath of air. She was standing outside smoking a cigarette when Lena appeared. At first, Julie said, she thought Lena had been drinking, but then she noticed how dazed Lena looked. She spoke to her, but Lena didn't seem to hear. She started wandering off up the street as if she didn't know who she was or where she was going.

"She acted exactly as if she had amnesia, Steve. I went after her and brought her back. She's downstairs now. She said something about having danced with you so I came up to ask what we'd better do. What do you suppose is the matter with her?"

Steve explained briefly, and Julie said, "Oh, how wicked of Dr. Rhead! How could he? If hearts really do break Lena's is cracking right now."

"I believe you," said Steve, frowning. He decided he didn't want to take Lena home immediately.

Nellie was on edge and if she started scolding her sister, it might be the last straw for Lena.

He asked, "Where's your escort, Julie?"

She hadn't any, Julie said, she'd come alone. She wasn't in the mood for a dance, she was too nervous about the forest fires in Maine, but she'd felt it necessary to appear just to show her good will. She'd done her duty now, she went on, having danced four or five times and if there was anything Steve could suggest in the way of helping Lena, she, Julie, felt free to go and do it.

He made a quick decision.

"We'll go to The Duck and Partridge Grill," he said. "A highball and something to eat will do no harm. Talking may take Lena's mind off herself. Try and bring the conversation around to your brother, Julie. It may shake her out of herself to hear about somebody worse off than she is."

"All right, Steve."

As they started down the stairs Steve took occasion to bestow a compliment. "You're a knockout in that gown, Julie."

"Oh, thank you." She smiled up at him, her eyes alight, "I went on a financial bender when I bought it. Jay's, in Boston. I shouldn't have squandered so much but . . . well, I had a yearning to look nice for once."

His hand was holding her bare arm. Her flesh was smooth and firm to his touch.

"Glamorous is the word," he said. "Some wizard must have designed that gown especially for you. I wish we might have danced together, Julie."

"So do I," murmured Julie. She paused to open a silver leather bracelet bag which dangled from her wrist. She took out a lace-edged handkerchief. Steve smelled violets again as on their ride to Maine. "Some other time perhaps," Julie said, touching her lips with the handkerchief, then returning it to her bag.

"Yes." There was a light over the stairs and he could see her plainly. "I like the way you wear your hair," he said. "Don't change it, will you?"

After the words were out he realized that they must sound foolish to her, but he had been wanting to say that ever since they had been to Maine. He wasn't quite sure why except that the smooth plainness of Julie's brown hair was an old-fashioned touch in a world so desperately modern that life had become an unceasing struggle to keep up with it.

He waited, half expecting Julie to laugh, but she didn't appear amused. For a moment she looked at him, eyes star-touched, then she said soberly, "No, Steve, I won't change it."

"It wouldn't be you," he replied.

They went on down the stairs.

Outside stood Lena, crumpled against a railing. She was close to the breaking point, Steve saw. She said nothing when he told her where they were going.

He was not sure that she heard.

CHAPTER XI

"A table by the window, Fritz."

"Yes, doctor, right over here."

Lena was still in that dazed condition, and Steve was beginning to wonder if it was going to be possible to shake her out of it. The little figure in white followed where Julie led, but Lena didn't seem to realize where she was or for what reason.

"This is an interesting restaurant," enthused Julie, as the head waiter left them. "It has an old world flavour, hasn't it?"

"Yes." Steve glanced quickly around the large room with its dark wood panelling above which a scenic wallpaper depicted an English foxhunt. The paper had faded with the years, until now the original red coats on the hunters were a pale coral. "It's the oldest eating place in the city. Established about 1875. Ever been here before, Lena?"

Lena shook her head, staring blankly at a glass of toothpicks on the table.

"Such lovely linen!" smiled Julie.

The food's excellent," said Steve. "What strikes your fancy?"

A waiter had handed them menus.

"Something to drink first," decreed Steve. "Manhattan, Lena? Rum Collins?"

Lena's chin quivered as she murmured, "I don't believe I want anything, thank you."

"I do." Julie quickly drew the waiter's attention to herself.

"An old fashioned, please, and a club sandwich."

Steve nodded with satisfaction. "That sounds okay." He

stole a glance at Lena. Her head was down. "Triple the order," he told the waiter.

"Yes, doctor."

The man went away and Julie remarked, "They seem to know you here, Steve."

"Yes." His eyes met Julie's across the table. They exchanged the sort of anxious, guarded look that might pass between doctor and nurse on a case. "This is an old stamping ground of mine." Steve looked away from Julie and at a massive sideboard on which was displayed cutlery, condiments, and boat-shaped dishes of oyster crackers. "It's handy to the hospital," he explained, "and they keep open practically all night."

At the moment there were only a few people in the main dining room beside themselves, but there were several private rooms and in one a birthday party was being held. Steve could hear corks popping and voices singing,

*Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you.*

"They're having quite a time in there," murmured Julie.

Steve was offering her cigarettes. She took one, turning to Lena, who sat beside her. "Do you smoke, Lena?"

Lena shook her head.

"I think you're sensible," declared Julie. She leaned across the table towards Steve, touching her cigarette to the lighted match he was holding out. "I started when I was in the service, and it's a hard habit to break."

She settled back in her chair.

"This is lots more fun than being at a dance," she went on after a pause. "It seemed to me as if all they played tonight were waltzes."

"Don't you like to waltz, Julie?" asked Steve.

"Not now," she sighed, "it makes me sort of ill."

Lena stirred in her chair and slowly lifted her head.

"Why?" she asked faintly.

"Because I used to waltz with my brother Neil," said Julie quietly.

"Oh," said Lena. She lifted her unhappy blue eyes to Julie's face. "Is he . . . is he dead?"

Julie's teeth bit into her lower lip. "Not dead, Lena. Crippled."

"Julie's brother is a war veteran, Lena," explained Steve. Julie had lifted her water glass and was drinking from it. Her face looked almost as white as Lena's.

She put the glass down carefully, saying, "He lost both legs."

A little shocked cry broke from Lena. Both her small hands fluttered out impulsively towards Julie.

"How terrible for both of you!" She looked across the table at Steve, and he saw that for the moment at least, Lena had forgotten herself. "Did he take it very hard?" she asked Julie.

"No, Lena, Neil's been magnificent." The waiter was approaching with the cocktails. Julie waited until he had put them down and gone away. Then she went on quietly. "He's always wanted to paint and his hands were left to him, so he's contented."

"Lena ought to meet Neil," said Steve. "She'd like him."

"Oh, I'm sure I would," said Lena quickly. "Is he . . . is he in a hospital?"

"No, he's in Maine, Lena, living in the house where we both were born." Julie smiled and sat turning her cocktail glass round and round in her hands. "Neil actually enjoys life more than most people who have their legs to get around on," she told Lena. "He doesn't want me to be unhappy about his injury but tonight, on that dance floor, he was all I could think about. He used to be such a wonderful dancer. When we were in high school we went to dances together. I never wanted to go with anybody but Neil. We had such a good time."

"Shall we drink a toast to Neil?" asked Steve.

"Oh yes," murmured Lena, lifting her glass.

They touched glasses and drank.

"Neil will enjoy hearing about this the next time I go home," Julie observed.

"How proud you must be of him!" breathed Lena.

"I am," said Julie, spreading her napkin on her lap.

For several minutes she went on talking about Neil and the

dog, Rowdy, while Lena sipped her cocktail and listened attentively. A little colour was coming into her face, Steve noted.

Julie was watching Lena's face, too, he realized. After a few more remarks about her brother, Julie asked, "How did you happen to become a laboratory technician, Lena?"

Steve said, "I don't wonder you ask. Lena doesn't seem to go with dead cats and test tubes, does she?"

At the moment Lena had a toothpick in her hand and was trying to spear the cherry in the bottom of her glass. She giggled as she jabbed it. The conversation and the cocktail had relaxed her.

"Tell us, Lena," Steve said, sending Julie a quick nod of satisfaction.

Well, said Lena, in her soft voice, Nellie was responsible. Nellie was a technician and she'd wanted Lena to be one so they could work together.

"Where is your home?" asked Julie.

She came from Middlebury, Vermont, answered Lena, adding that her parents still lived there. Both she and Nellie, Lena said, had attended Middlebury College.

The club sandwiches arrived.

"Another round of cocktails, doctor?" asked the waiter.

Julie shook her head and Steve said, "No, but you can bring three pots of coffee." As the waiter went off, Steve asked, "Will coffee keep anyone at this table from sleeping?"

"I have no intention of sleeping," said Julie, "at least not until I eat my club sandwich."

Steve grinned. "I meant later, when you'd gone to bed."

"Oh, sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. Tonight it won't."

"How can you tell?" asked Lena.

"After what we took in the operating room today nothing could keep me awake," declared Julie. She carefully removed the top of her sandwich.

"Why do some people always feel impelled to look into a sandwich?" inquired Steve, placing salt and pepper in front of Lena.

"To see what's inside," answered Julie.

"But you already know what's inside a club sandwich," he argued.

"The chef could be absent-minded, couldn't he? I want to make sure I'm getting your money's worth."

Steve, who had begun to struggle manfully with his three-tiered sandwich, muttered, "I need the mouth of a rhinoceros to eat one of these concoctions."

"Just what I was thinking," said Lena, with a ripple of mirth.

Laughter was the best medicine in the world, thought Steve. He realized that after they left Lena tonight she might lapse into a depressed mood, but it would be a different type of melancholy from the one which had threatened her earlier. She would cry herself to sleep probably, but her despondency would be mitigated by what had happened here and by Lena's realization that somebody had cared enough about her welfare to try and help her.

Announcing her intention of tucking her napkin in her neck no matter how it looked, Julie asked solemnly if the dab of mayonnaise on Steve's chin was intended to start a new male fashion.

"A goatee is quite becoming to him, isn't it, Lena?" she asked.

Lena choked with laughter and had to be pounded on the back. She drank water, recovered her composure, and began to nibble at her sandwich again. She was, Steve realized, on the borderline between laughter and tears. She could easily become hysterical. With that in mind he began to talk seriously about the hospital. Did either Julie or Lena know how the hospital had started? he asked.

"I don't," said Julie, "tell us, Steve."

How quick she was to get his unspoken signals!

He began telling his audience how fifty years ago the hospital had been a private residence, the home of a wealthy and eccentric woman named Clara Estabrook.

She was a spinster with a strong aversion to children. No child was allowed to set foot on her grounds. According to the story, she used to watch from her windows by the hour, ready to tap a warning on the glass if any child dared to trespass. This went on

until one day when there was an accident at a railroad crossing near her house.

It was in the winter of 1897. A trap filled with children was driving towards the railroad tracks when the horse, becoming frightened, ran away. A train was approaching and the gates were down, but the terrified animal plunged through. Though horse and driver escaped injury, the train struck the trap and ten children were seriously hurt.

They were carried to the nearest house which happened to be Clara Estabrook's. There was nothing she could do but take them in and help put them to bed while doctors were being summoned. Five of the children died within the next few days.

Clara Estabrook was a changed woman, and a year later, when her will was read, it was found that she had left her property to the community with money enough to remodel the house into a hospital.

"I'm glad to know the history of the place," said Julie, when Steve had finished speaking.

"So am I," said Lena, "I must tell Nellie."

The waiter brought the coffee. It was freshly made, strong and fragrant.

"Nellie and I often make coffee in our room before we go to bed," said Lena, daintily wiping her lips with her napkin. She had a sweet, childish mouth that went with the rest of her, thought Steve. He noticed that her voice was quite steady. "We have drip coffee," Lena went on, "so the other roomer won't smell it."

"Neil would live on coffee if he could," remarked Julie. Having finished her sandwich, she pushed her plate aside and drew her coffee cup closer to her, saying, "I believe I'll have another cigarette, Steve." She picked up the package which was lying between them, found it empty and crumpled it in her hand, reciting, "And when she got there, the cupboard was bare."

Steve pushed back his chair and rose. "That's easily remedied. I'll get some at the desk." He was glad to stretch his legs. "Order dessert while I'm gone, Julie."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"What are you going to have?"

"I've been dreaming of Sultana Roll," she said, laughing up at him.

"Suits me fine."

He looked at his watch as he moved down the length of the room. It was ten-thirty. Not too late, he thought. Another hour and he'd be in bed having pleasant dreams. It had been a queer evening, but it was turning out all right. Lena wouldn't be tempted now, as she might have been earlier, to go home and take an overdose of sleeping tablets. She'd had time to regain her balance.

The cashier's desk was in a hall outside the main dining room. Steve bought a package of cigarettes and went back to his table. As he sat down Julie was giving Lena directions for a knitted tam. "You wouldn't understand this, Steve," she said. He busied himself opening the package of cigarettes while he listened absently to the pleasant sound of Julie's voice.

He was looking towards the door and his breath caught suddenly in his throat. Two people, a man and a woman, had just come in. They were selecting a table and a moment later they sat down.

It was Leslie and Richard Kane.

Steve tore open the package of cigarettes and offered them to Julie. He struck a match and held it for her. With a murmured, "Thanks, Steve," she went on talking to Lena. "You could knit a scarf to go with the tam. It makes a stunning set. Aquamarine would be perfect on you, Lena." Steve took out a cigarette for himself, thinking that now there was going to be the devil to pay. He could hear Leslie speaking in her clear, decisive voice. She was asking Fritz, the head waiter, if the lobster was to be recommended. He was reassuring her. She gave her order. In another moment, Steve thought, she'll look over here and see me.

What then?

He sat smoking and watching her. Leslie had taken off her mink jacket and put it over the back of her chair. She looked strikingly handsome in a tailored frock of turquoise blue. Her

head was bare; her pale golden hair scraped high and bound with a blue ribbon.

Steve had an unhappy feeling that no matter what he said about his presence here with Julie and Lena, this would cause a widening of the breach between himself and Leslie. He had a sensation of being inextricably entangled in something bigger than he was which he didn't attempt to define.

The feeling persisted and it made him nervous. He tried to shake it off.

Better take the bull by the horns, he decided.

He excused himself, got up and moved quickly across the room.

"Good evening."

He knew Leslie had seen him approaching, but she gave a masterly imitation of surprise. Flattening her back against the chair she stared up at him, her eyes widening. "Why, Steve! Did you drop through the roof?"

"I'm here with friends," he said.

"How jolly! Won't you join us?"

Richard Kane stood up by his chair. He said, with his urban and slightly academic air, "Do, Lovett."

Leslie motioned to Fritz. "We'll have two tables put together," she announced smoothly. She was wearing blue eye shadow. It deepened the colour of her eyes, giving them a mysterious and slightly oriental look. "Unless," she added smilingly, "you three prefer to be by yourselves, Steve?"

He felt white-hot beneath his clothes.

"No need to upset you, Leslie," he answered. "We're nearly ready to go."

"Oh, I see." She waved the waiter away. "Well, I can't say I blame you for not wanting to share such pulchritude." A tall, frosty-looking glass was set in front of her. She looked down at it, then up at Steve. "What's the occasion?" she asked.

"A dance sponsored by the nurses and hospital personnel."

"Oh?" Leslie eyed him. "And you took *two* girls to it? You do find time to play a little, don't you, Steve?"

She took a lighter from her handbag and lit a cigarette, while

Kane stood patiently by his chair, his shrewd, close-set eyes looking first at Leslie, then at Steve. Steve felt rooted to the floor. He wanted desperately to let Leslie know what had actually brought him here, but it was a long story and he couldn't bring himself to tell it in front of Richard Kane.

Unexpectedly, at that moment, Dr. Kane spoke in Steve's behalf.

"It's difficult to side-step those hospital affairs, Leslie. They're frightful bores but one is expected to attend."

Leslie drank from her glass. As she put it down, her eyes challenged Steve.

"I don't think Steve's finding this too painful, Dick." She leaned forward in her chair, looking past Steve at Lena and Julie. "The little one in white is cute," she said appraisingly, "but the one in blue is quite beautiful. She has brown eyes, hasn't she?"

"Yes." Steve felt like a fool.

"I thought so. Well, don't let us keep you, Steve. I know you're anxious to get back to her."

The words were spoken lightly but the way she said them—as if this was no more than she had expected from Steve; as if, given the slightest opportunity, he would play the fool—made Steve feel that it would take something more than words if he and Leslie were ever to get back on their old affectionate footing.

"How's your uncle, Leslie?" he asked in a desperate attempt to divert the conversation into a safer channel.

"He's on a trip, Steve," she said pleasantly. "I expect him home in a day or two."

Steve turned to Richard Kane. "Dr. Denton's absence puts quite a load on you, doesn't it?"

Kane murmured, "Rather," and Leslie, with set face, hastened to say that her uncle never worried about the clinic when he was out of town. "Dick's so utterly dependable," she stated.

After another moment or two, Steve broke away and returned to his own table. His face must have showed some of his inner turmoil for he was aware of Julie's troubled eyes regarding him closely. She said nothing, however.

The ice cream had been served. It was melting in the saucers.

"This is soup," Steve remarked cheerfully. "Why didn't you go ahead and eat yours while it was still ice cream?"

"We wouldn't have enjoyed it without you," said Lena.

"Well, in its present form we need straws, not spoons." He looked around for the waiter. "We'll order again."

Julie said quickly, "No, Steve, let's go." She looked at Lena. "You're ready, aren't you?"

"Yes," murmured Lena.

"Just as you say, Julie."

The waiter came with the check.

They got up and started out.

They had to pass Leslie's table. Julie was nearest to it. She was moving along ahead of Steve, her full skirt billowing gracefully around her. She came abreast of Leslie's table and suddenly it happened. A glass went over, water splashed the front of Julie's new gown.

"Oh, I'm frightfully sorry!" exclaimed Leslie, with a quick look at Steve. "Will it stain?"

Julie scarcely glanced at her dress. She was looking at Leslie and smiling faintly. "I don't think so," she said.

Leslie smiled back. "But it's such a pretty gown."

"Thank you," murmured Julie.

It was like a bad dream, thought Steve. Leslie had deliberately tipped that glass of water over, and now she was pretending it was an accident.

He sought for something to say but no words came.

Leslie was still smiling up at Julie. "If the stains remain have it cleaned and send the bill to me, won't you?" She added sweetly, "Steve will tell you who I am."

CHAPTER XII

On the following Monday, Vincent Rhead's patient quietly entered the hospital, appearing as anxious as Vin to keep her operation a secret. She was booked for observation which would ordinarily have meant a lapse of several days before operation to allow time for a complete study of her physical condition.

Vin, however, did not intend to run the risk of a possible investigation which might spell ruin to his carefully laid plans. He was determined to do the case early Tuesday morning before any of the staff men appeared.

The first operation scheduled for that day was at 8.30, when Dr. McCormick was down for a gall bladder. Gretta Maddison had made a strict rule to the effect that the operating, barring emergencies, could not start until 8.30.

Steve awoke at 6.30 that Tuesday to hear Vin talking in an apologetic tone over the telephone. Vin was in his pyjamas, sitting on the edge of his bed with bare feet dangling. A cigarette hung from one corner of his mouth.

Steve realized Vin was talking to somebody on the operating floor.

"I hate like sin to bother you at this hour," he was saying regretfully, "but frankly I'm worried. I have a patient with a chronic appendix who has suddenly blown up with an acute aspect. I'm afraid to wait." Hearing that, Steve grunted. Vin threw him a wise look and went on smoothly, "Notify Zeller, will you, and tell Maddison I'd like to use the room at 7.30. It won't take long."

Vin listened to something being said on the other end of the wire, answered gravely, then hung up with a jubilant, "That does it. Maddison can't refuse the room for an emergency."

"Wait until she gets a look at your patient's appendix," remarked Steve.

"She can't prove anything."

"Perhaps not, but she can make it plenty uncomfortable for you."

"Oh, stop worrying," said Vin in an airy manner.

He tossed his cigarette into an ashtray and lay back against the pillows, yawning.

After a moment he asked, "Are you coming over and watch the fun?"

Steve said in a tone of boredom, "No thanks, I have a better way to utilize my time."

"Suit yourself," shrugged Vin.

He was in high spirits. He lit another cigarette, then lay smiling and blowing imperfect smoke rings at the ceiling. He informed Steve that Burt Saunders, a surgical intern, was going to assist him. He said he hoped Julie would be on the instrument table.

By the way, Vin went on, Julie had looked pretty keen at the dance Saturday night, hadn't she? A dream in that blue gown. He'd watched her waltzing with Saunders. She was the best dancer on the floor.

"What about Lila McCann?" asked Steve abruptly. "You gave her a rough time of it."

"That was her own fault, Steve, she took too much for granted. That's the way with those shy, demure ones." Vin's voice took on a tone of injury. "Once they take a liking to you they think you belong to them. Now Julie's different," went on Vin, his eyes narrowed speculatively, "she keeps you guessing. Even when she says no to something you propose, she does it in such a way that you immediately want to ask her again."

"She's polite, if that's what you mean," said Steve.

"She's exciting," murmured Vin.

He inspected a hangnail, pulling at it slightly. Presently, he began to talk about his patient again.

"Wait until this case breaks, Steve. None of Rhea's relatives or friends know about it yet. She hasn't told a soul."

"Why not?"

"Doesn't want it to get to Richard Kane until it's all over," chuckled Vin. "She says Kane will never speak to her again."

Vin turned his head, rolling his eyes towards Steve. "Isn't that sad?"

The muscles of Steve's mouth tightened.

"Leslie will resent it, too."

"I expect that."

"Don't you care?"

"Why should I?"

"She's been rather nice to you, hasn't she?"

Vin's lip curled.

"Sure, in her *noblesse oblige* manner."

Steve got out of bed and walked to the window. Another sun-filled and treacherously beautiful day, he thought. The dried-up leaves on the trees looked as inflammable as tissue paper. There appeared to be hardly a drop of water in the little brook.

Vin went on talking. Frankly, he said, he'd be relieved when this case was over and Rhea Gardner had gone home. The lady was a bore. She could talk the ears off a mule and that wasn't the worst of it, either. She liked to be fed chocolates while she was having her forehead stroked.

"What some people will do for money!" muttered Steve.

He threw a disgusted look in Vin's direction as he crossed the room and turned on the radio. He listened impatiently to a commercial, then the announcer began a report on the forest fire situation. Much of it was repetition, but there was one item new to Steve. Biddeford was burning; the glow could be seen in Portland twenty miles away.

He turned the radio off.

"Your mother's not in danger, is she?" asked Vin.

"Not yet but with these freakish winds anything can happen."

Vin was standing in the middle of the floor, doing the exercises that kept his waist trim.

"D'you suppose the atom bomb had anything to do with all this?"

"How could it?"

"I don't know, but the seasons aren't what they used to be."

Steve made no reply.

Later, when he had eaten breakfast and was on his way to the

wards, they began to page him. Answering his page, he was informed that he was needed in the operating room.

It was then close to seven-thirty.

He felt inclined to disregard the peremptory summons, suspecting Vin of some trick, but his conscience would not let him. After a few moments of indecision, he ascended to the operating room where he found Vin completely stripped of his earlier air of unconcern and bordering on a state of panic.

He was scrubbed up and ready to operate.

"Steve, you'll have to help me!"

"Why?"

"Burt Saunders dropped out. Claims he's sick. Says he ate some salmon last night that gave him ptomaine. It took him when was he getting into his gown and he's gone to his room."

The unexpected, thought Steve. In surgery it was always the unexpected you had to be ready for. Vin had forgotten that.

Steve said hardily, "It's your party. Get a couple of nurses to help you."

"I can't! I tried that but Maddison blocked me. She's in a temper because I got her out of bed so early." Vin jerked his capped head nervously, admitting, "She suspects something."

"Why wouldn't she?"

"Don't stand there talking!" fumed Vin. "Zeller's got the patient under ether. Julie's ready. Everything's set if you'll just act like a human being, Steve."

"Stick my neck out, you mean, don't you?" corrected Steve in a grim tone, but even as he spoke he was moving away from Vin and towards the dressing room.

He was acting against his better judgment and perhaps he was being a fool, but a patient lay waiting and he told himself he had a duty towards her. As part of the hospital to which she had trustfully come, he owed her his services.

While Steve scrubbed up, Vin paced back and forth, his gloved hands protected by a towel.

"What's your patient's condition?" asked Steve.

"She's okay. Hurry up, can't you?"

"What do you want me to do? Get up there and push the hands of the clock ahead?"

"It's getting late, Steve. McCormick gets under way at eight-thirty, and you know he always comes up early."

"You should have thought of that before."

"How could I know Saunders would be sick? If he hadn't deserted I'd be half through by now."

The water splashed down on Steve's forearms. He asked, "What did her lab work show?"

"Nothing unusual," said Vin impatiently.

"She's too obese. You should have put her on a diet."

"Oh, she's strong as an ox, Steve!"

Somewhat later, Steve entered the operating room. He greeted the others with a nod, and for a moment his eyes met Julie's in a look of resigned acceptance to the circumstances which had forced this situation upon him. In answer, her eyebrows lifted slightly. She slowly shook her head, then looked away from Steve and down at the table beside which she stood.

"So he got you into it too, did he?"

The acid remark came from Gretta Maddison. Her pale green eyes were narrowed in anger as she looked from Steve to Vin, then back to Steve again.

Steve said nothing. One of the nurses had opened a gown and was holding it ready. He got into it, and another nurse who was not scrubbed up tied it in the back.

It was hot in the operating room and the atmosphere was tense.

As he got his hands into gloves Steve addressed Johann Zeller.

"Is she all right?"

The anaesthetist looked up from his low stool at the patient's head. Beside him stood the complicated anaesthesia machine with its handles and gauges and the twin cylinders of gas and oxygen. Zeller was frowning slightly. Adjusting the rubber nose-piece that partly obscured the patient's face, he said, "She is flushed and drowsy." The anaesthetist addressed Vin, asking, "Did you medicate her heavily?"

"Yes, I did," said Vin impatiently. "Can I go ahead?"

Zeller hesitated a moment, checking the pulse at the patient's temple. At last he said, "Yes, go ahead."

When the operation got under way Steve was able to relax somewhat. Though still angry at having been forced into a situation he had been so determined to avoid, he told himself that there would probably be no very disastrous or even unpleasant repercussions. Vin was competent; he was doing about as simple an operation as there was in the whole book of surgery; it would be over in a short time.

Julie's voice broke in suddenly on his thoughts.

"Why not enlarge that cut, Dr. Rhead, so you can see what you're doing?"

It was most unusual for Julie to address the surgeon, particularly in this manner. Vin's fingers remained motionless for a moment while he directed a surprised and somewhat resentful glance in her direction.

Steve said, "She has the right idea, Vin."

Vin had made a dainty little incision which would no doubt make a hit later with his patient, but the size of it was a decided drawback in the matter of speed.

"It's plenty large enough," muttered Vin crossly.

He had two fingers in the wound and was feeling around for the appendix.

"Any adhesions?" inquired Steve.

"I don't feel any but she's full of blubber."

"What would you expect?"

The sweat was appearing on Vin's forehead. There was a body to wipe it off. It rolled slowly down inside his mask. He continued to feel around futilely.

This was ridiculous, reflected Steve impatiently. Another inch or two would have given Vin plenty of space to work in. Didn't he realize that time was passing? Steve was about to call Vin's attention to that when he noticed a sudden movement on the part of the anaesthetist.

"What is it?" he asked.

Zeller spoke gravely. "Her pulse is too rapid. I do not like it."

His words tightened up every nerve in Steve's body.

"Well, slow it down," barked Vin. "That's your job."

"I am not sure that I can slow it down," replied Zeller.

Vin started to say something more but Steve cut in with, "Don't talk. Get that appendix out."

"I can't find it!"

"Take the nurse's advice and enlarge the incision."

"Give me another minute or two. Ah!" Vin's breath came out in a gusty sigh of relief.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw the supervisor pick up a white enamel basin and move across the room towards the table. This, he thought, was the moment Maddison had been waiting for. She wanted a look at the appendix.

The anaesthetist was speaking.

"The patient's blood pressure has dropped. I do not understand it." With a sharp look at Vin, Zeller added, "I was given no opportunity to study this case."

Vin was pulling the appendix up through the absurdly small opening. Maddison stood waiting with the basin. Vin's fingers were all thumbs, thought Steve. He was slowing himself up by his anxiety to be finished and out of the room before Brian McCormick appeared.

Vin looked up suddenly with an explosive, "Damn it, a split glove!" He snatched his fingers out of the wound, saying accusingly to the supervisor, "You gave me a patched one. Get another and be quick about it!"

Maddison took her time. She moved deliberately across the room, put the basin down, picked up a container of sterilized gloves and walked back to where Vin stood fuming.

She lifted the cover.

Julie reached in swiftly and took out a glove. She helped Vin get his hand into it. It was a struggle. The second glove was too small.

"Why don't you sew her up, Vin," suggested Steve, "and go after the appendix later when you have more time?"

"No." Vin spoke between his teeth.

He went to work again.

The sun was streaming in through the great glass windows of

the operating room. The heat was increasing; the air felt stale. A sponge fell to the floor and one of the nurses kicked it aside.

Maddison came back.

After Vin had excised the appendix, he dropped it into the basin. Steve saw the supervisor inspect it closely.

"This appendix looks normal," she stated.

Nobody spoke. She marched off, her thin lips tight. A short time later, when Vin was closing the incision, Johann Zeller swung around suddenly on his stool and reached out towards a table where the patient's chart lay. Steve had not known Zeller could move so fast.

He turned back, checked his patient's pulse, then began to look over the papers attached to the chart.

Vin stitched and tied; Steve cut the ends from the knots.

"Where is the urine report?" Zeller's voice, ordinarily so unruffled, was sharp and seemed to echo and re-echo in the silence of the room.

"Don't shout. It's there." Vin spoke irritably as he continued his meticulous stitching.

"I cannot find it."

"Well, take another look."

Steve handed the scissors he was using to Julie and moved around the table. He took the chart from the Austrian's hand and thumbed quickly through the papers.

The report in question was not there.

He addressed one of the nurses. "Go down to the lab and get the urine report on Mrs. Gardner."

Carelessness, he was thinking; the unpardonable sin on the part of a surgeon, and he was at fault almost as much as Vin. He should have insisted upon knowing the results of the lab tests before this operation started.

There'd be nobody in the lab at eight o'clock, the nurse was objecting.

"You can find it. Hurry."

She went out.

"How about some salt solution?" Steve asked the anaesthetist. Zeller nodded slowly.

"A good suggestion, doctor."

Steve spoke to the supervisor. In a moment or two she came to the table carrying the solution and a length of rubber tubing with an infusion needle on the end of it.

"Do you really think she needs that, Steve?" asked Vin.

He had taken the last stitch and was putting on a dressing. His voice had lost a good deal of its tenseness.

"Can't do any harm." Steve carefully inserted the needle into the patient's vein.

"But I want to get her off the table."

Steve ignored that. He went on with what he was doing.

"Couldn't we give it to her after she's in bed?" protested Vin.

Zeller addressed him sharply.

"Your patient is in shock."

"In *shock*?" Vin stripped off his mask and mopped the perspiration from his face with it as he strode to the head of the table.

"Aren't you exaggerating?" He stared down at the unconscious patient. "She looks pretty good to me."

At that moment the nurse who had gone down to the laboratory came bustling in waving a paper with the explanation that she'd found the report without the least bit of trouble.

Steve was not surprised. He had expected it to be in plain sight.

He held out his hand. "Let's see it."

When he observed that it was made out in Nellie's bold, perpendicular handwriting he was quite sure why it had not been included with the other papers. He presumed that Nellie had deliberately held it back, not because she wished any harm to come to the patient—Nellie knew how carefully the doctors studied the chemistry work before operating—but simply to slow Vin up a bit, to make things more difficult for him. She may even have entertained the idea of forcing Vin to go to the lab for the report himself, thus giving her an opportunity to speak her piece.

It had probably been done to get even, and ordinarily it would not have mattered greatly but this one time it did. Vin had been over-confident. He'd been thinking too much about himself and

too little about his patient. Without verification he had assumed that Rhea Gardner's condition was normal. It was not. Unknown, probably even to herself, she was a diabetic.

The report showed four plus sugar.

Steve tossed the paper at Vin.

"Take a look at that!"

He swung around to Zeller, explaining the situation.

"That accounts for the drowsiness," muttered the anaesthetist, "no doubt she was in a coma when she came on the table."

"What shall we do, Steve?" asked Vin desperately.

"Get some insulin into her. It's our only chance."

"Yes, yes," agreed Zeller.

Julie asked, "How many units, Steve?" She seemed by far the calmest person in the room.

There was no time for pondering. Steve made a quick decision.

"Fifty units."

"I'll get it," she murmured.

While Steve and Julie worked over the patient, Vin stood by helplessly, running his fingers through his hair and saying, from time to time, "She'll snap out of it, won't she, Steve? She'll snap out of it?"

"Sure," answered Steve, but it was a desperate hope, a whistle in the dark.

When the insulin was half in, he addressed the anaesthetist in a low tone.

"Well?"

Zeller made a negative movement of his head. "I don't like it, doctor. She's not responding."

Vin covered his face with his hands and walked away from the table. A sound like a groan broke from him.

The room was stifling but Steve was aware of a cold chill passing over him. Sometimes the death of a patient was inevitable, but this should not have been one of those times. A pre-operative study of the case would have averted disaster. It was his fault, thought Steve, as much as Vin's. He knew Vin's carelessness. He should have insisted upon checking up on the

patient's condition. If Rhea Gardner died wouldn't he, Steve asked himself, be as guilty of her death as Vin?

He stared wretchedly down at the patient. One of her eyelids suddenly fluttered. She didn't want to die, he thought miserably. Why should she? She had everything to live for.

Julie said, "Could you get the insulin into her any faster, Steve?" Julie still seemed the calmest person in the room. "It's moving so slowly," she murmured.

"Ycs," he agreed, "it is."

He reached out and made an adjustment of the clamp on the tubing.

"That should help, Steve." Julie's low voice was like a cool hand laid against his throbbing temples.

The minutes passed.

"How is she now?" Steve inquired of the anaesthetist.

Zeller bent over the patient. When he finally straightened up Steve observed that the anaesthetist's white face looked slightly less haggard than it had.

"She seems somewhat improved," he answered in a tone of great relief.

The minutes dragged by. As the last of the insulin went in, Steve spoke again.

"Do you think she'll make it?"

It seemed to him as if the world stopped revolving and stood very still during the moment or two in which he waited for Zeller's answer. He knew the Austrian would hold out no false hope.

Zeller listened to the patient's heart. He inspected her colour and felt her skin.

At last he said, "She will live."

Vin turned eagerly to Steve.

"Thanks, old man, I . . ." he began.

Steve brushed him aside with the remark, "She may need more insulin. You'd better get an emergency blood sugar."

He didn't want to talk to Vin or to anybody. He needed air and a cigarette.

As he stepped out into the corridor, he saw Dr. Brian

McCormick striding towards him. The older man nodded curtly while his cold blue eyes scrutinized Steve's wrinkled and sweat-stained operating clothes.

An orderly approached, wheeling a stretcher.

"Emergency, Lovett?" asked McCormick, frowning. He was a jealous man. He resented the operations done by other members of the staff.

"Yes," said Steve. He started to walk away.

"Hold on a minute," commanded McCormick. "Whose case?"

There was no escape.

"Dr. Rhead's," said Steve. He moved off quickly, but he was still within earshot when he heard McCormick's voice in the operating room demanding harshly, "What's been going on here, anyway?"

CHAPTER XIII

It was three o'clock that afternoon when Steve was summoned to the director's office. He had spent a difficult day trying to keep his mind on his work and his mouth shut. Brian McCormick had taken occasion to say some caustic things which Steve was not likely to forget in a hurry. He had not defended himself. What was the use? To add to his discomfort he had a black eye, having walked into a fight between two old derelicts in one of the male wards the latter part of the morning. They were throwing things and before Steve could duck, a slipper caught him squarely in the right eye. His eye became puffed up and discoloured and soon a story began to circulate to the effect that he and Vin had had a fist fight. It didn't seem worth while to Steve to go into explanations. After what had happened, he wasn't sure that he would be around the hospital much longer.

He was in the Record Room, dictating some notes on patients to a stenographer, when Amy Thatcher, the director's brisk,

red-headed secretary, poked her head in the door and said, "Well, thank goodness I've found you, Dr. Lovett. Mr. Scott wishes to see you in his office at once.

Steve nodded and with a remark to the stenographer that he would be back later, got up and went out of the room and along the ground floor corridor to the director's office.

The door was closed. He rapped. A voice said, "Come in." He obeyed, closing the door behind him.

There were five other people in the small, crowded office. John Sylvester stood quietly by one of the windows with his hands in his pockets; Brian McCormick, in a belligerent attitude, was pacing back and forth; Vincent Rhead stood in one corner of the room, his hands making nervous gestures towards his hair, his necktie, the fountain pen clipped to his pocket; Sidney Greason, the keen-looking, energetic young pathologist in charge of the laboratory, was standing beside a Boston fern absent-mindedly fingering one of the delicate fronds; Dale Scott sat at a walnut desk, a pained expression on his usually smiling countenance.

"Well, Dr. Lovett, which door did you bump into?" the director asked in an obvious attempt to relieve the strained atmosphere of the room.

Scott was a chubby, bland-faced little man in his late thirties. He had a head that looked too large for his body, a pair of expressionless blue eyes, and the clear pink complexion of a healthy infant. Some years ago his brown hair had begun to disappear at an alarming rate, and to conceal this fact the director wore a glossy, chestnut-coloured toupee. It was becoming, but it fooled nobody except Mr. Scott.

Steve explained briefly the cause of the accident to his eye.

"As long as it was received in the line of duty we will look upon it as a decoration rather than a disfigurement," declared the director graciously.

"And now that that's disposed of can we get down to business?" asked Dr. McCormick with unconcealed sarcasm.

"Certainly, certainly," Steve heard a sigh escape the director.

He was a soft-spoken, affable man who disliked conflict in any form, particularly among the members of what he openly and proudly referred to as "my big happy family." Looking almost pleadingly from face to face, he asked, "Won't you gentlemen be seated? We might as well be comfortable."

There were chairs enough, but nobody made a move to sit down and with another sigh—for comfort was paramount to him—Mr. Scott said regretfully, "Well, then, standing or seated we must face the fact that a patient has come close to dying under conditions that should not have existed."

McCormick growled, "She's lucky to be alive." He paused in his pacing and rapped his knuckles sharply on the edge of the director's desk, demanding, "Since when has it been permissible for residents to have private patients?"

Steve, standing with his back against the wall and his eyes on McCormick's enraged countenance, was sharply aware of the older man's unreasonable envy and his monumental fear of competition.

Dale Scott said in a constrained murmur, "There is no rule against it, doctor."

"There should be."

"Granted." The director leaned forward, picked up a green pencil and scribbled a notation on his desk pad, saying he would take the matter up with the Executive Committee.

"When I was a resident I'd have been kicked out on my ear if I'd tried any such stunt," snapped McCormick.

Over by the window John Sylvester moved slightly and thrust his hands deeper into his pockets as he said, "Times have changed, McCormick."

He sounded tired, and glancing quickly at him Steve noted with compunction that today Dr. Sylvester looked his age and more. His skin had a distinctly greyish tinge. Whether it was due to the strong light coming through the green draperies at his back or because of the fact that his faith in his two younger colleagues had been rudely shaken Steve did not know, but he was unhappily aware that he was in part responsible for the chief's disturbed frame of mind.

"You're right, Sylvester," agreed McCormick irately, "times have changed and not for the better."

"Oh, come now," put in the pathologist with a faint smile, "it's still a pretty good world we live in."

"I agree," said Mr. Scott. "Considering two wars and a depression, gentlemen, I believe we've done very well in this hospital." The director spoke soothingly as he leaned back in his swivel chair and flicked a bit of cigarette ash from the sleeve of his tan gabardine suit. He fixed his gaze on a portrait of Clara Estabrook, founder of the hospital, which hung opposite his desk. "She would be proud of us," he declared, his eyes moving slowly and almost affectionately over the stern, New England features of the woman in the picture.

There was a moment or two of silence, during which Steve could hear the wind blowing outside. It was a north-west wind and it was brisk enough, he realized apprehensively, to rekindle old forest fires and start new ones. His mind was dwelling on that when he heard McCormick say, "It was the last war that exalted fellows like these two. They were little tin gods for the time being. They could take all the chances they wanted and no questions asked. No wonder they came back to civilian life determined to make their own laws."

Steve remembered those stifling days and nights in Burma when the operating went on all around the clock, when help and supplies were not forthcoming, when weariness and fever frequently dropped them in their tracks, when the Japs were nightly overhead. Perhaps they had impersonated little tin gods out there but it was that, he thought, or go mad.

Dr. Sylvester was saying, "When it comes to that, McCormick, the war gave civilians privileges as well."

McCormick flushed a bright red. He said nothing more and after a moment of silence, Vin spoke up.

"May I say something?"

"Certainly, doctor." Scott smiled encouragingly.

"It's simply this," said Vin, eyeing McCormick coolly. "Steve and I weren't in cahoots about this case. From the first he refused to help me."

"But he did help you," retorted McCormick, glaring.

"Only because Burt Saunders got sick when he was getting into a gown. Ptomaine, he said, from some salmon he ate last night."

The director murmured sympathetically, "Poor fellow." He made a second notation on his desk pad as if he intended to look into the matter of the spoiled salmon. "Most distressing—ptomaine," he stated.

McCormick consulted the watch strapped to his muscular left wrist and announced tersely that they weren't getting anywhere. "A patient all but dies on the table and you sit there, Scott, sorrowing over an intern with ptomaine poisoning!"

Scott lifted his blue eyes reproachfully to the other's face.

"Have you ever had ptomaine, doctor?"

"I certainly have and lived through it, too! On the other hand this unfortunate lady, who was foolish enough to put herself in the hands of two amateurs, came close to not living." Steve jumped a little as Dr. McCormick shot a question at him. "You knew what Rhead intended to do, didn't you, Lovett?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell Scott or one of the staff?"

Steve was silent and Dr. Sylvester, taking his hands from his pockets and clasping them behind him, said, "No man wants to be a tale-bearer, McCormick."

"But there was a moral obligation involved, Sylvester. It was his duty to the hospital. You can't deny that this whole business smells to high heaven."

"We don't deny it," said the pathologist impatiently "but nobody is infallible. Don't we all make mistakes?"

With an angry movement of his shoulders, McCormick went on, "The hospital's reputation is at stake. The public has a right to expect that proceedings here will be carried on in an ethical manner. How would it sound if people discovered that an assistant resident was allowed to book a private patient without the knowledge of the director or any of the staff? What would the public think if it knew that a girl in the admitting office was played up to so she would admit this patient without question,

that another girl in the business office received a five-pound box of chocolates to keep her mouth shut after she'd taken the patient's deposit, that a floor nurse was promised half a dozen pairs of nylon stockings if she said nothing about a certain patient in a certain room?"

He paused to let his words sink in. Mr. Scott fingered his toupee nervously. Nobody spoke and after a moment McCormick's indignant voice went on.

"Here we have a patient operated on for appendicitis when all the time she has diabetes. Why wasn't it known? Because the surgeon, if we can call him that"—McCormick cast a withering glance at Rhead, who was nervously buttoning and unbuttoning his white jacket—"was too busy playing a game of hide-and-go-seek with the higher-ups who might have interfered with his fun to interest himself in his patient's real condition. She starts going bad on the table and our smart young man loses his head. Others have to give her salt solution and insulin and in spite of that they come very close to losing her."

McCormick took a turn around the room.

"Look fine in print, wouldn't it? The papers would gloat over something like that. It would be a little different, a little more damning than a missing towel or sponge or an anaesthesia explosion!"

Greeson, backed into a chair. It clattered to the floor. The pathologist set it on its feet with a bang.

"Why should all that get into the papers? She didn't die. Certainly nobody's going to talk about how close she came to it." The jacket of Greeson's grey suit was open. He pulled it together with a jerk, adding, "It was an unfortunate incident. We've all agreed on that, but haven't we discussed it sufficiently?"

McCormick snapped back that discipline must be lacking in the laboratory if reports were left kicking around and had to be hunted up at a critical moment.

"I take exception to that, McCormick." There was a glint of anger in the pathologist's dark eyes. "I wonder if you realize what my girls are up against? Two technicians are still out and I can't get reliable substitutes. You doctors pile work on the girls

without taking into consideration the fact that they're only human and get tired. Naturally, they forget once in a while. If everybody in this hospital did as well at their work as Lena and Nellie there wouldn't be much to complain about."

"They're well paid, aren't they?" asked McCormick sharply.

"You can't buy the kind of service they give," replied the pathologist. He added, "Perhaps you'd like to know that the Denton Clinic would be delighted to employ Lena and Nellie at substantially higher salaries than they're getting here."

"Oh, we mustn't lose them," said the director in a distressed voice. There was an electric clock on his desk. He looked at it, then away and at Dr. Sylvester. "May we have a word from you?" he asked.

Dr. Sylvester, still standing in the exact spot where he had been when Steve entered the room, did not answer at once. His head was bent, his gaze fixed on the plain, taupe-coloured rug. He was a patient and a compassionate man and, though not one to minimize the seriousness of the mistake that had been made, Steve had a feeling that John Sylvester had been standing there listening and thinking to himself that men under pressure, economically or otherwise, were frequently led in the wrong direction.

Raising his eyes slowly, Dr. Sylvester said at last, "We can be very grateful that the patient's life was saved. As a matter of discipline to those involved I believe we should consider first the interests of the hospital."

Steve was thinking of the years of service John Sylvester had given to this place. He had only a short time left before his age would automatically disqualify him for the position of surgeon-in-chief. Another man, seeing his retirement in such plain view, might not concern himself particularly with what happened to the hospital from now on, but Dr. Sylvester was different. This institution had been his workroom; he had used it unselfishly, and he wanted the results of his labour to benefit those who came after him.

"We have several courses open to us," he was saying quietly, his calm gaze on McCormick's frowning face, "the most natural,

perhaps, being to make an example of one or both of the parties most at fault, but just how much would that benefit this place and the sick people in it?" He paused and looked around, as if to give each one of them a chance to speak but there was no sound in the room. After a moment more of silence, Dr. Sylvester went on speaking.

"From my point of view the incident is closed. The guilty parties know how we feel. I propose that we drop the matter."

He paused again, his eyes moving quickly from face to face. Dale Scott nodded vigorously; the pathologist, glancing surreptitiously at his watch, as if he had just remembered an engagement he had to keep, murmured, "I quite agree"; McCormick, standing now with his hands on his hips, looked unconvinced but he said nothing.

Steve, who had begun to feel a flicker of hope, glanced swiftly at Vin. Vin had his eyes down and his lower lip was caught between his teeth, but his pose was less rigid and he appeared to be breathing more easily.

John Sylvester cleared his throat and went on, "We could satisfy our personal feelings by dismissing the young lady in the admitting office, the one in the business office who was in on the scheme, and the floor nurse as well, but I doubt if the hospital would benefit from that. For one thing, people who have been discharged under a cloud feel themselves abused. They talk to relieve their feelings and to justify their actions in their own eyes and the eyes of their friends. We don't want their ill will; we need their loyalty."

"I wouldn't count too much on that," said McCormick gruffly.

"I have found loyalty is often born of kindness and consideration," Mr. Scott said. "I think Dr. Sylvester is right on all counts. There must be no gossiping outside. Public opinion, you know."

Public opinion was the bugbear of every hospital, thought Steve, the irresistible force, the ball that once started rolling could crash down on any institution and demolish it.

"Shall we, then," asked Dr. Sylvester, "go on as if this had not

happened?" He looked from face to face. "I would suggest one thing further. That when we leave this office we take no grudges with us. Hospitals are for sick people. They shouldn't be used as a battleground for the emotions of those who work in them." He inserted two fingers in his vest pocket and took out a book of matches. Turning it over and over in his hands, he went on talking in a voice that had the effect of a sedative on the nerves of his listeners.

"As Mr. Scott has pointed out, the hospital has done well to date and we may all take pride in its record but, gentlemen, we have our most difficult era ahead of us. Everywhere people are in a state of mental turmoil. None of us know from day to day what is going to happen. The chaotic European picture is scarcely more confused than our own American scene."

Dr. Sylvester looked gravely, almost sadly, around.

"We are facing an uncertain future, gentlemen, as far as medicine is concerned. The nursing situation has never been in a more desperate state; money in general is tighter; there are movements all over the country towards socialized medicine, anti-vaccination, mystical healing and all sorts of quackery. The doors of this hospital may close in spite of us, but at least we can hold that day off if we continue our trust in each other."

"United we stand," murmured Scott, "divided we fall."

Brian McCormick cleared his throat.

Steve had watched the expression change slowly in those hard blue eyes. Still adamant inside, Brian McCormick would obviously have preferred to see some drastic action taken, but he was a shrewd as well as a covetous man, and now that his jealousy had been allowed a vent, his shrewdness was uppermost. Without the Springville Hospital in which to operate McCormick would be in a difficult position.

He stopped frowning and said in a somewhat subdued voice, "Yes, we're headed for rough water and I imagine it will be all we can do to keep our heads above it." He broke off and swallowed as if his anger had suddenly formed itself into a hard ball and risen in his throat, demanding out. Jerking his head up out of his collar with a quick movement like that of a wrestler getting a

stranglehold on his opponent, he conceded the point by saying, "Very well, we'll drop it, but I want that new rule made, Scott."

The telephone rang. Mr. Scott lifted the receiver.

"Yes?" He listened for a moment, his face slowly lighting up as if he were receiving some unexpected good news. "Today?" he asked. And then after another remark on the other end of the line, "Why, certainly. Tell her I'll be delighted."

He hung up, beaming.

"That was my secretary. She's been taking my calls outside so that we wouldn't be disturbed. She has just informed me that Miss Elizabeth Vance, our lovely benefactress, has decided to do something more for the hospital and would like to consult with me." Joyfully, Scott rubbed his plump white hands together, asking, "Have any of you gentlemen a request to make? I rather thought it would be jolly to redecorate the Doctors' Room at this time."

Miss Vance, the "lovely benefactress," was an elderly spinster with frizzed hair, a Carrie Nation jaw, and a good deal more money than she knew what to do with. Mr. Scott was a genius at handling her. Every month or so, he paid his respects to her at tea time; at Christmas and on her birthday he sent her a floral offering in the name of the hospital. He consulted her on minor matters connected with the institution, and whenever she honoured the place with a visit he personally squired her around.

As a result, she had furnished half a dozen private rooms, paid for a model nursery, installed X-ray equipment, financed needed repairs at the nurses' home, and had even let it be known that the hospital would benefit from her will.

"Why bother with the Doctors' Room?" asked McCormick, who spent little time there. "We need surgical instruments."

"Do we?" Mr. Scott scribbled happily on his desk pad, suggesting that Dr. McCormick make an itemized list of needed instruments when he got around to it.

"Why not modernize the lab?" put in the pathologist.

"Another good idea," murmured Scott, "we'll consider it." He put down his pencil, pushed back his chair and rose, indicating

that the meeting was about to be adjourned. "And what would you gentlemen say to air conditioning for the whole hospital?" he asked, smiling.

The others nodded vigorous approval.

They moved out into the corridor, leaving Mr. Scott in his office. Amy Thatcher went in, closing the door carefully after her.

"Any bloodshed?" she asked softly. She walked to her desk, the black skirt of her tailored suit swinging just below the calves of her pretty legs. She was an excellent secretary; experienced and discreet.

"No bloodshed." Mr. Scott was standing before a mirror inspecting his toupee lovingly.

"There won't be any dismissals?"

"No." The director straightened his green tie. "They left in complete harmony."

"Did I time the call right, Mr. Scott?"

"Perfectly." He turned from the mirror, smiling. "And now get me Miss Vance on the telephone. It's about time she heard from me, anyway. I'll run over to the florist and pick up a bouquet before I drop in on her. I made a few promises to the doctors, you see, and I need her co-operation."

Moving towards the telephone, Amy said admiringly, "You're wonderful, Mr. Scott."

The director then admitted modestly, "Sometimes I really am inspired, Miss Thatcher."

CHAPTER XIV

"And I thought she was my friend," remarked Leslie as she looked across the table at Steve. They were in the cocktail room of the Stanhope House, a local hotel. It was about five in the afternoon, on Thursday, two days after Rhea Gardner's

operation. "When I think of the many times she's been entertained in Uncle Walt's home, and then to go behind my back like this!" Leslie's eyes flashed indignantly. "It hurts, Steve."

"Of course it does," he agreed. He moved restlessly in his chair. He wanted to forget that particular episode. At the hospital he was constantly reminded of it. He had wanted to keep his record clean and now it looked smeared to him, and he wished Leslie would refrain from talking about Mrs. Gardner.

"It's not over as far as I'm concerned." Leslie glanced idly around the dimly lighted, oval-shaped room. There were a dozen or more small square tables with shining black tops and a long bar with stools. Behind a white-coated bartender, who was making rhythmic movements with a cocktail shaker, rose a shining pyramid of bottles. Leslie went on. "It was an insult to Uncle Walt and a reflection on the clinic. All my friends are talking about it, Steve."

"I suppose so," he murmured sympathetically.

A smiling waitress in a green uniform, with the sleeves so stiffly starched that they stood out like wings, came to the table.

"What'll you have?" Steve asked.

"A Bacardi with grenadine." Leslie glanced up at the waitress. "And bring a bowl of popcorn. I'm starved."

"Make mine rye and ginger ale," Steve said.

The girl wrote on her pad and went away. The bar was below the street level and from above, where a tea dance was in progress, strains of orchestral music floated down to them.

Leslie took a gold cigarette lighter from her suede handbag and snapped open the cover. She was dressed throughout in black and with her tanned skin and pale gold hair, she made a marvelous picture to Steve's eyes.

Putting one of her monogrammed cigarettes between her lips, she said, almost resentfully, "I suppose I'll have to send her flowers."

"Why?" he asked.

"Appearances have to be kept up, Steve."

"Do they?" Her feminine logic was too much for him.

Leslie was working at the lighter with the ball of her thumb.

The wick refused to ignite and with a look of exasperation she snapped the cover down, remarking, "It won't work. Uncle Walt brought it back to me from his trip."

Steve extended his hand. "Let's see it. Perhaps it's flooded." So Walter Denton was back in Springville. Had he had a chance to look over his accumulated mail?

Leslie handed over the lighter. "Bring me some matches, please," she said to the waitress who was putting their drinks on the table. "And don't forget that popcorn."

The girl smiled and went away.

Watching Steve's long-fingered hands as he worked over the lighter, Leslie said in a low tone, "Darling, isn't it fun to be together again?"

Steve raised his eyes and looked at her, reflecting that their reconciliation was the only good thing—outside of the fact that he hadn't been fired or suspended from the hospital—to come out of the nearly fatal operation on Rhea Gardner. On Tuesday Leslie had telephoned in great excitement. She had just heard that Vin had operated on Rhea Gardner, she told Steve. Was it true? When assured that it was, Leslie said she must talk to Steve. Consequently, they had arranged this meeting.

"If you knew how I'd missed you," Steve told her.

"I do know," she whispered contritely, "it's been the same with me. I'm such a fool at times, Steve."

"Who isn't, sweetheart?" She was wearing a wide-brimmed hat which shadowed the upper part of her face. As she leaned towards him the light was focused on her mouth. Her full red lips were exquisitely shaped. He stared at them, leaning towards her slightly and saying, "I want to kiss you. Would you object if I did it here and now?"

Her lips parted in a smile, but she drew back slightly. She was wearing crystal ear-rings in the shape of tiny ice cubes. She reached up and tightened one, saying, "Later, darling."

"Must I wait, Leslie?"

"I thought you objected to public demonstrations, Steve."

"I do." He leaned back in his chair. The waitress had brought the popcorn and matches. She put them down and went off.

Steve abandoned his attempts to make the gold lighter work, saying, "I guess I'm a failure as a mechanic. It won't perform for me either." After a moment he asked, "When did your uncle return?"

"This morning early. Steve . . ."

"Yes?"

"Is Rhea doing all right?"

"Yes, she's fine." He lit a cigarette, taking his time about it.

"Everybody's asking me questions," sighed Leslie. "There are all kinds of rumours flying around."

"Rumours?" He looked up quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, they're saying Vin's going to marry her."

"Is that all?" He sighed with relief.

"All?" Leslie looked at him reproachfully. "Rhea's my friend. I've known her for years. I don't want to see her get into a marriage with a fortune hunter."

"She can take care of herself, Leslie."

"If she marries him, Steve, I'll never speak to her again."

"Yes, you will."

Leslie tossed her head. "No, I won't."

She was silent for a while, staring down into the depths of her cocktail.

"I told you, didn't I, Steve, about the gift shop we're opening at the Denton Hospital?"

"Yes." He remembered that Leslie had said she was sponsoring the event.

"Tomorrow's the day," she said, "and Rhea was going to pour for me. I was depending on her." Leslie sighed. "I don't know who I'm going to get to take her place."

"You'll find somebody," Steve said.

"Will Rhea be in the hospital long?" asked Leslie.

"I don't know what Vin's plans are for her."

Leslie's eyes were slowly searching his face. "You weren't in on the operation, were you, Steve?"

He felt as if barbed wire was rising on all sides of him. He had hoped to avoid that question.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I was."

Leslie stared at him incredulously.

"I was dragged into it, Leslie," he explained. "The man who was going to help Vin was taken ill at the last minute. I assure you I had no intention of being at the operation. It was just one of those damnable quirks you don't expect in life."

Her eyes softened; she nodded slowly.

"I understand, darling." He saw with great relief that she was sorry for him. She sipped her cocktail, ate some popcorn, and presently asked, "Why didn't you call me up and tell me, Steve?"

"I wasn't sure you'd speak to me, Leslie."

That seemed to satisfy her.

After a few minutes he inquired, "Would you like another cocktail?"

"Yes."

He motioned to the waitress. The music upstairs had stopped and he could hear a newsboy out on the street, shouting the headlines. More lights had been turned on in the room and several people were coming in.

The waitress approached.

"Another Bacardi for the lady."

"Yes, sir." She picked up Leslie's empty glass and set it on her small tray. "Shall I bring you a highball?"

"No thanks, but this popcorn is disappearing fast."

The waitress went off, carrying her tray shoulder high.

"Did your uncle have a pleasant trip?" inquired Steve

"Yes." Leslie had taken out her compact and was powdering her face. She lifted her chin and turned her head from side to side, looking at her reflection in the tiny mirror. Frowning slightly, she snapped the compact shut and put it back in her bag. "He looked terribly tired, poor dear, and he stayed home only a few hours."

"Oh?"

"He's worried about his place at Bar Harbour," explained Leslie. "They told him over the phone that it wasn't in the path of the fire, but he felt he should go and offer his services, anyway. He left in his car about noon, taking Dick Kane and two others

from the clinic with him." Leslie paused, waited until the girl had come with her cocktail, and then went on, "I'd have gone except for the opening of the gift shop. Both Uncle Walt and I felt I should attend that."

Upstairs, the music had started again. They were playing *The Blue Danube*.

"Uncle Walt is wonderful," said Leslie.

"About the fire?"

"No, Rhea. I hated to break the news to him but all he said was, 'If that's what she wanted to do she had a perfect right to do it.'" Leslie's slender fingers brushed a bit of powder from the front of her black dress. She was wearing a crystal necklace that matched her ear-rings. Fingering it, she said, "I don't look at it that way. It seems to me a poor return for years of friendship. Of course I wouldn't expect anything different from Vin. How much do you suppose he'll charge her for the operation, Steve?"

"Search me," murmured Steve.

"Hasn't he talked it over with you?"

"Vin talks a lot, Leslie. I let it go in one ear and out the other."

Leslie's foot began to tap the floor beneath the table. She picked up one of her black suede gloves and pulled impatiently at the fingers of it, asking, "Was Julie in on the operation, too?"

He nodded, and for a moment Leslie looked so beside herself that he thought she intended to get up and leave. Then suddenly, as if she realized the difficulty of his position, she smiled and said, "I apologize, Steve. I always seem to make it hard for you, don't I? You must have been through a good deal. You look it." She added, "How thankful I'll be when you're through with that place!"

"So will I," he said.

"Darling!"

She put her hand out, and Steve covered it with his and they sat for a moment smiling at each other.

"You must hate Vin for dragging you into the operation," murmured Leslie.

He shook his head and at once Leslie's smile faded. She withdrew her hand. "Really, Steve, you can be so annoying!"

He sat there, looking down into his empty glass, making no attempt to explain, realizing that even if he tried he couldn't make Leslie understand. She'd had too much all her life, he reflected, to know what it meant to be born poor, as Vin had been. It was the instinctive shrinking from the pain of poverty that made ~~Vin~~ snatch at whatever he thought he could get.

The Lovetts had been needy, too, mused Steve, but in a different way. He realized now that his mother must have had to pinch and save almost mercilessly to provide for them both, but she had never let him see the struggle she was going through. Children's wants are few and whatever he yearned for as a child had somehow been forthcoming. His mother had made a joyous game of life, and consequently he had never experienced that feeling of emotional insecurity that Vin had known and still was subconsciously aware of beneath his swaggering manner.

Hate and pity weren't compatible, and he pitied Vin from the depths of his heart.

"Well, I can tell you one thing," Leslie was saying, "he's definitely out of the running as far as the Denton Clinic is concerned."

"Did he have a chance?"

"Yes. Dick Kane thought Vin would be quite a drawing card. He met Vin that Sunday evening at Uncle Walt's house, and he was impressed with his personality. All that charm, you know."

Steve laughed drily. "A decoy? Would he have been allowed to operate the cases he brought in?"

"If they weren't too difficult, Steve."

"I see." They were applauding upstairs. The sound came to Steve's ears like the far-off tap-dancing of feet on a roof. He was looking across the table at Leslie, thinking of something Owen had said one day when they were discussing clinics in general. "Unless you're on the top rung, my lad," Owen had declared, "you take what they give you regardless of your training. It's Hobson's choice." Would he be contented with the cases they tossed him? Steve wondered. He said slowly, "Kane gets the cream, doesn't he?"

"Naturally, Steve."

"Yes, of course, naturally." He laughed silently. Had he thought *he* would land on the top of the pile at the first jump? You had to work for what you got. Walter Denton was a fair man. Steve thought, I'd stake my life on that.

Feeling cheered, he glanced at his watch. It was five minutes to six. He was having dinner with Leslie, but he had arranged to telephone his mother at six o'clock. He had talked to her earlier that day and learned that there had been a blaze in some woods at Fryeburg. "There's nothing to be alarmed about, Steve," she had said calmly, "it's not in my immediate vicinity and in any event I'm packed and ready to evacuate."

He spoke to Leslie of the call he wanted to make.

The waitress came with their check. He paid it and they went upstairs and into the lobby of the hotel. The tea dance was over. The musicians, carrying their instruments, were moving, single file, towards the main dining room.

"Shall we eat here?" asked Leslie.

"If you'd like."

"I hear there's a new chef," she said. "They say the food's quite good."

"We'll find out later."

They walked to a telephone booth. Steve stepped inside, pulled the door closed and put in his call. Leslie was strolling up and down and he watched her through the glass, noting the many admiring glances she drew from those who passed, both men and women.

The air in the booth was unbearably close. Standing with the receiver at his ear he opened the door a little. Leslie glanced at him and smiled. He smiled back. In a few minutes they were ringing the number. He heard the sound of the bell, and then his mother's voice.

"Hello?"

"This is Steve. Are you all right?"

"Yes, Steve, but I'm glad you called. I'm afraid I have bad news for you."

He tightened his grip on the receiver. "You're in danger of being burned out?"

"No, no," she said quickly, "we were seriously threatened but they have it under control. Brownfield and East Brownfield are reported on fire. It's blowing a gale here and we can see huge billows of smoke over in that direction."

Steve's knees felt like rubber. He thought of Neil, helpless in a wheelchair.

Mrs. Lovett went on, "It may not be as bad as it looks. Owen's here. He just arrived. He's going to drive me over there. Tell Julie not to worry."

"Be careful," begged Steve. "I'll be with you as soon as I can get there. I'll bring Julie."

He hung up and stepped from the booth.

Leslie caught at his arm.

"Steve, Steve, what is it?"

He repeated what his mother had told him.

"Oh, heavens," breathed Leslie, "what are you going to do?"

"Pick up Julie and start for Maine," Steve said. He was moving towards the door.

"I'm going with you," declared Leslie, half running to keep up with him.

"You'd better not. I don't know when I'll be back."

"That doesn't matter," cried Leslie, "you need me. I'll drive. I don't trust that old car of yours. It might go to pieces before you got there. Now don't try to stop me, Steve. I'm going. I'd hate myself if I didn't. You rush back to the hospital, darling, and I'll pick you and Julie up in half an hour."

With a smile and a quick pressure of her hand on his arm, Leslie was gone.

CHAPTER XV

It was daybreak when they finally reached Maine. As soon as Steve returned to the hospital from the Stanhope House, he went at once to the director's office to ask permission to make the trip

and to take Julie with him. Mr. Scott was absent and Amy Thatcher, sitting at the telephone with a worried expression on her face, waved aside the words Steve would have spoken. There had been an automobile accident, she said, and four badly injured people had been brought in. The police had learned their identity and Amy was contacting relatives and trying to line up blood donors.

"They need you in the operating room," she said.

Upstairs, Steve found Dr. Sylvester and McCormick, Vin, Burt Saunders, Zeller and another anacsthetist, Julie, Gretta Maddison, and half a dozen nurses hard at work. He said nothing to Julie then about his plans, but managed to relay a message to Leslie, explaining his predicament and suggesting that she give up the idea of accompanying him to Maine.

Word came back that Leslie would be ready when he was.

She was wearing her uniform and driving a beach wagon bearing the insignia of the Red Cross. Except for that badge of authority, Steve realized, they would have been detoured more than once for the regular routes of travel were blocked off to ordinary cars.

"Would you like me to drive, Leslie?" he asked.

"No, Steve," she shook her head quickly, "I'm not tired." She flashed him a smile, then leaned slightly forward to address Julie who sat on Steve's other side. "How are you feeling?" she asked sympathetically.

"I'm all right, thanks," said Julie, but her voice was husky with weariness and suppressed emotion and out of the corner of his eye Steve saw her hands tighten together in the lap of the blue wool coat which she had thrown on over her uniform.

"Well, it won't be long now," said Leslie cheerfully.

Steve had dreaded this ride, partly because of what he feared they might find at the end of it, and partly because he had anticipated coolness and antagonism towards Julie, but one of his fears, at least, had proved groundless. When Julie and he had finally come downstairs from the operating room, desperately tired and worried, Leslie had had a thermos of hot coffee and some sandwiches waiting. She had quietly but firmly insisted that they eat

and drink before starting out. She had tucked a small cushion behind Julie's tired back when they got into the car, and evidently realizing that talking would be an effort, she had said very little during the long ride.

Steve felt grateful to her and even in the midst of his anxiety and foreboding he was glad that Julie was seeing this side of Leslie.

"It's going to be another hot, windy day, Steve," Leslie observed, as they drove along.

"I'm afraid so."

"Do you suppose they'll attempt to produce artificial rain by dropping dry ice into the clouds?" asked Leslie, as a plane roared high above them.

"They've been talking a lot about it," Steve said, shifting his position slightly to relieve an ache between his shoulder blades. "Anything is worth trying."

"Yes." Leslie peered through the dusty windshield, then leaned forward and wiped it off with her gloved hand, asking, "What town are we coming to?"

Julie answered, "Waterboro."

"Oh," murmured Leslie.

There was a slight movement of her hands on the wheel as if she were remembering the last disturbing report on the rapid progress of the fire in Waterboro. It had come over the car radio, and on the heels of it an excited male voice had informed them that Brownfield was in an even worse predicament. Leslie had at once turned off the radio, remarking that reports were always exaggerated at a time of fire or flood. They had all agreed and none of them had suggested turning the radio on again.

"Did you hear from your uncle?" inquired Steve. By now, he thought, Bar Harbour must be an inferno.

"No," said Leslie, "but I didn't expect to. He'll be all right. Uncle Walt's not the kind to take unnecessary risks."

"No," said Steve. His pipe was between his teeth. It had been unlighted for a long time. He took it from his mouth and put it

into his pocket, asking, "Did you find somebody to take over the opening of your gift shop?"

"Yes. Elaine Harrison. She'll be in her element."

Julie murmured, "It was kind of you to drive us."

"I wanted to help in some way," said Leslie.

Suddenly, she stiffened.

"Oh, Steve, look!"

Ahead of them a great cloud of smoke had appeared on the horizon. A moment later they came into view of a blazing meadow where men and women, using shovels and brooms, were frantically beating at the flames.

Beyond the meadow the hills were a flaming semicircle.

"How on earth did these fires make such headway?" asked Leslie.

Julie spoke in her tired voice.

"The wind and the slash."

"Slash?"

"Forest debris. They're careless about it. They leave it lying on the ground after logging. When it dries out its tinder."

"There'll be a lot of it when this is over," remarked Steve.

A few miles farther on a man stepped out into the road and held up his hand. He had the weatherbeaten skin of the farmer; he carried a shotgun.

Leslie pulled up, saying, "Red Cross. I have a doctor and nurse with me."

"Oh," murmured the man, rubbing his red-rimmed eyes, "I didn't notice. We're looking for firebugs."

"Found any yet?" asked Steve.

"No, but we got a list. We're looking specially for some fellers from New York."

"I hope you catch them," said Leslie.

The farmer's grip tightened on his shotgun as he stepped back to let them proceed.

"I hope so, Miss."

The smoke was increasing. The wind blew it into their eyes and lungs and with it came a faint, nauseating odour which Steve identified as the smell of burned animal flesh.

"We're coming into Waterboro," he said, watching a man who had hitched up his team of horses and was doggedly ploughing a fire-break around his home. He did not look up as they drove by.

The car moved slowly through the burned-out section of the town. They sat without speaking, aghast at the sight of the fire-ravished woodland on both sides of them, the fallen telephone poles and dragging wires, the houses levelled to their stone foundations.

"How can they ever come back from it, Steve?" sighed Leslie, when the desolate place was behind them.

They would come back, he said steadily. Maine people always came back. They weren't weaklings.

The car picked up speed.

They drove on through the grey, sultry morning. They did not speak. Occasionally, one of them coughed. The air was oppressively warm and full of ashes. The ashes settled on the car and on them. They saw only a few signs of life as they went along; a farmer crossing from his barn to his house with two full pails of milk; a boy leading cows to pasture; a woman coming out of a house with two suitcases in her hands; a man trudging across a field with a fire-fighting tank strapped to his back.

Leslie said at last, "How much farther on is Brownfield?"

"Not far," he said, "only a few miles."

He had never dreaded anything as he did that ride into Brownfield.

Leslie leaned forward to speak to Julie.

"Do you live right in the town?"

"No," Julie's voice was scarcely audible, "on the outskirts."

"Is it before we get to the town?"

"No. We have to go through the town."

The smoke thickened until it was like a grey shroud through which they could barely see.

"I hope I don't hit anything," murmured Leslie, slowing the car to a crawl, "this is like driving in a heavy fog." She peered down at her watch. "You wouldn't know it was daylight."

On their left a monument in a family graveyard was a white

finger piercing the pall of smoke. The car crept over a small stone bridge and then across some railway tracks. The smoke lifted slightly. Steve looked for the railway station.

It was gone.

He looked for the trees, the tall, stately trees which had stood on both sides of the road, full-leaved and beautiful, on his last trip through Brownfield.

They were gone, and in their place stood naked black monstrosities that would never leaf again.

Nearly everything was burned beyond repair. He looked about with sick eyes as the car inched its way along. Homes, stores, public buildings—all were destroyed.

Julie sat motionless beside him.

What could he say to her?

This was her birthplace; this was where she had grown up and gone to school. She had attended church here, she had shopped in the stores, she had walked the streets and talked with the people.

They continued on through the blackened ruins of what so short a time before had been a peaceful, prosperous New England community. They saw nobody. It was a ghost town.

The car came to a fork in the road.

"Which way?" murmured Leslie.

"To the left," directed Steve.

That flight of steps. There had been a school there. He remembered it well. A plain, unpretentious, country type of school such as he, himself, had attended.

Nothing but ashes now.

Those two gasoline pumps rising up out of the parched earth. Behind them had stood a small, neat station. He had bought gas there from a friendly attendant. The place was levelled to the ground.

They rode through another section of burned forest where the pine trees stood holding their dead brown needles as if defiant to the last to cling to their own, across an open stretch which was still green and untouched by fire due to the freakishness of the wind, and then on to more smoke and ashes and devastation.

Steve touched Leslie on the arm.

"Stop here."

Julie stumbled as she got out of the car. She knew that the house was gone, Steve thought pityingly, she had noticed instantly that too-broad expanse of skyline where there should have been a green roof and a white frame house. Her eyes had seen ashes, still smouldering, and the twisted piece of metal, the white iron bed that had melted in the fierce heat, the pump handle, the crumpled brick chimney.

He said, "Julie," and put out his hand.

But she was out of reach. In her crumpled white uniform she was running across the blackened lawn.

"Let her go, Steve," said Leslie.

He watched the slender, swiftly moving figure. Julie passed the ruins of her home with scarcely a glance at it. She was headed towards the solitary figure of a woman, who was poking with a stick in the ashes of her own home.

Steve thought, The house doesn't matter. It's Neil.

He could almost hear the throbbing of Julie's heart.

Neil, Neil, Neil.

Leslie said, "She has a lot of pluck, Steve."

"Yes."

"I hope her brother's safe," sighed Leslie.

Trapped in a wheelchair, thought Steve. Had Neil had a chance to save himself?

Julie had reached the woman. They were talking together.

"Was it a nice house?" asked Leslie, her eyes on the empty space above the cellar hole.

"Old," he said, "comfortable. Low ceilings, uneven floors. A lot of sun pouring in. A place you felt at home in."

Julie turned and he saw her start back towards them.

"I'm afraid, Steve," murmured Leslie.

"No," he said, his heart lifting, "no, she has good news. She's hurrying. She wouldn't come so fast if it was bad news."

They went to meet her.

"They're safe," Julie cried, her voice breaking for the first time, "Neil and Rowdy are safe! Somebody carried Neil out of the

house at the height of the fire. Then a man and a woman came and took him away in a car." Julie looked at Steve, her hollow eyes deep in her white face. "They went towards Fryeburg."

His mother and Owen.

"Thank God," he said.

Leslie did not speak, but as they moved back to the car she put her arm around Julie and the girl leaned a little towards her.

They walked along together like sisters, Steve thought.

He was glad; he had wanted them to be friends; it was the second spot of brightness in the dark, dreary day.

Neil safe. Leslie and Julie friends.

Neil was telling his story. He was a slender young man with a pale, sensitive face and eyes like Julie's. He was in his wheelchair in one corner of Mrs. Lovett's sitting room. A knitted afghan of bright wool squares lay on his lap. His dog was beside him; muzzle resting on outstretched paws.

Julie was sitting on the floor, holding one of Neil's hands and looking up into his face as if she could never bring herself to look away.

There were six other adults and a baby in the room—Steve and his mother, who stood side by side near the fireplace; Leslie, who was sitting on the piano stool; two women refugees from Brownfield, a young mother holding her infant son in her arms, and an old woman of about eighty whom the younger woman addressed as Gran and who sat with her gnarled hands folded in her lap and a look of patient resignation on her face; and Owen, who sat straddling a desk chair with his long arms folded along the back of it and his eyes fixed on Julie.

"It was late in the afternoon," Neil was explaining, "and I was putting the finishing touches on my painting of the mountain. It was practically done and then, suddenly, while I was looking out the window I saw the whole top of the mountain burst into flame. You never saw such a sight, Julie!" He looked down at his sister, then up at the faces of his other listeners. The room was very still. "It was like watching an army of red and orange flags whipping around wildly in the wind," he went on, his voice

rising with excitement, "and then it started racing down the mountain."

Neil paused and ran one narrow, long-fingered hand back over his hair, then looking down at Julie he went on.

"I wanted to get it into my picture. Maine on fire! I intended to sketch it in, then get out with the picture and my paraphernalia and finish it later on."

"Oh, Neil," murmured Julie, pressing her cheek against her brother's hand, "you shouldn't have taken a chance like that."

"I know," he said, giving Steve a rueful glance, "I'm just a painting fool, I guess."

"What was Rowdy doing all this time?" asked Leslie, crossing her knees and glancing admiringly at the handsome animal.

"Oh, Rowdy was making an awful fuss," admitted Neil, fingering the crocheted edge of the afghan, "he realized the danger."

Early in the day, Neil went on, he'd closed the doors and windows in the house so the wind wouldn't blow his things around. When he finally woke up to the fact that he'd better start getting out if he wanted to get out at all, the fire had nearly reached the house. The smoke was seeping in; he could hear flames crackling. People were running around outside and shouting to each other. It was getting hot. He wheeled himself to the front door but he couldn't get it open. Then he went for the back door but in the kitchen his wheelchair tipped over.

"I began to think about you, then, Julie," the boy said in a low tone, "how you'd trusted me to stay there alone and look out for myself. I didn't mind dying but I didn't want to let you down. I was ashamed of myself for not getting out when it would have been easy."

Steve was watching Julie. She was still dry-eyed. Maine people hold on to themselves, he thought. But there was a limit. Sooner or later she was going to break. He knew it would come. It had to.

Rising to get a cigarette, Owen said, "The road was jammed. I thought we'd never get through." He looked at Steve with a slight quirk of his lips. "Your mother wanted to get out and push."

Steve put his arm around his mother. In her pale green morning dress she looked as neat and well-groomed as always, but there were dark shadows beneath her eyes, mementos of fear.

She said, "I hope I never see anything like it again."

Neil went on talking.

"Rowdy had his teeth in my clothes. He was trying to drag me to a window. The flames were licking up the walls of the house. The heat and the smoke were terrific. Rowdy kept pulling at me. I was blacking out fast. Then a man came running in. I don't know who he was. He had a towel wrapped around his face. He picked me up and carried me out. He ran back in and got my chair. He was off to help someone else before I could thank him."

Julie's head was down. She said in a muffled voice, "We must find out who he is."

Neil put his hand on her hair.

"Everything's gone, Julie."

She lifted her head slowly. "I'm sorry about your picture, Neil. The rest doesn't matter." She put her hand on his. "I want you to go on with your painting. When I come up again I'll bring you what you need."

Leslie got up from the piano stool and held out her hand to Owen. "Come on. I need your help."

They went out together.

"I must get you all some breakfast," announced Mrs. Lovett.

"Wait a minute," said Steve, "let's see what Leslie's up to."

The baby stirred and whimpered; the young mother hushed it. The old woman stared at the floor. Julie stood up slowly, smoothing the wrinkles from her uniform.

Steve waited, his eyes on the door.

Leslie and Owen came back in, laughing. Owen was carrying an easel and several canvases. Leslie had two sketch books, a slightly used palette, pencils, brushes, and a good many tubes of paint.

She piled the articles on Neil's lap, explaining that one of her uncle's hobbies had been painting but that he hadn't touched a

brush in years. All of this stuff had been packed away, she said, and she had thought it might come in handy.

Neil was exultant. Steve could see the delight shining in his brown eyes. Neil tried to speak and the words caught in his throat.

"Make a sketch of Julie," suggested Owen, "I'll buy it."

"Oh, no, not me," murmured Julie. She leaned down suddenly and kissed her brother on the forehead. "Sketch Leslie," she told him, "playing the piano in her uniform just the way she would if the war was on and this room was a canteen. She used to entertain the service men and she must have been wonderful at it." Julie looked across the room, her eyes meeting Leslie's. "If you ask me," she said softly, "Leslie's wonderful in every way."

"Why, thank you, Julie," murmured Leslie in a pleased voice.

"We're all of that opinion, Leslie," put in Steve's mother warmly.

"And just to prove it," said Steve, walking over to the piano and putting his arm around Leslie, "I'll go Owen one better. I'll not only buy the sketch but I'll frame it." For a moment he held Leslie close to him to show his appreciation of what she had done for Neil.

Owen grinned and struck a pose, declaiming, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." He stepped behind Neil's chair, asking, "What angle do you want to get her from?"

Mrs. Lovett and Julie went into the kitchen. Neil directed Owen where to wheel his chair, his own hands being too full to do the task. Leslie began to play. The young mother hummed and rocked the baby. Gran tapped the floor with her foot. Rowdy followed his master and settled down again beside the wheelchair, eyes watchful.

A few minutes later, when Neil had begun to sketch and Owen stood watching over the boy's shoulder, Steve strolled out into the kitchen. It was empty. Mrs. Lovett called to him from the pantry. He went in there and helped her take down some dishes.

"What happened to Julie?" he asked.

"I needed some eggs and she offered to get them for me,"

answered Mrs. Lovett, as they went back into the kitchen. "I think she's reached her limit, Steve."

"Yes." He had caught a glimpse of Julie's drawn face as she had left the sitting room.

"This has been a terrible experience for her," went on Mrs. Lovett, taking a glass jar of coffee from the kitchen cabinet. "For all of us, of course, but particularly for Julie. She's been worried over such a long period of time and then those last hours of suspense." Steve's mother shook her head slowly as she prepared the coffee and crossed the kitchen to the stove with it. She set the percolator over the heat, then went to the refrigerator in her small back hall and took out milk, butter and a roll of home-made sausage meat. "Why don't you go out and see how she is, Steve," Mrs. Lovett suggested, as she put the food down on the sink shelf. "If the subject comes up," she went on earnestly, "let Julie know that I want Neil to stay with me indefinitely. They'll rebuild eventually but it will take a long time, and I'd love to have him if he's happy here."

"He seems to be," said Steve.

"He was beginning to feel a little lost without his work," admitted Mrs. Lovett. She took a carving knife from the kitchen cabinet and felt the edge. It seemed to satisfy her. She began to slice the sausage meat, saying, "I understand now, Steve, why you fell in love with Leslie. She's a fine person."

"I knew you'd feel that way about her," Steve said. His grey eyes were happy.

He whistled softly as he went out the back door.

CHAPTER XVI

Mickey sprang at him from the tall grass.

"What's the matter, puss?" Steve bent to rub the cat's ears. "Nose out of joint?"

The black and white cat rubbed against him in an ecstasy of friendliness, then ran ahead and disappeared around the corner of the shed where Mrs. Lovett kept her gardening tools.

Steve walked on. The air was blue with smoke haze but the sun was shining.

The low door of the hennery was half open. He ducked his head and stepped over the threshold. A basket of eggs was standing on the floor. There were several rows of nests with a Plymouth Rock hen sitting on each nest. Beyond, in a corner, stood Julie. Her hands were up to her face.

She was sobbing.

Steve said, "Julie."

She started violently, then turned her back to him.

"Please go away."

"Must I?"

She choked, "I want to be alone, Steve."

"But I'd like to talk to you," he said gently.

"No."

"Then I won't talk," he said matter-of-factly, "I'll just stand here."

It was warm and still. One of the hens ruffled her feathers and clucked annoyance at the unwelcome intrusion of humans into her domain. From afar off came the muted whistle of a train.

"I'm glad the eggs are over on my side of the room," ventured Steve presently. "Otherwise, you might throw one at me."

Julie said nothing. Her hands still covered her face.

"I wouldn't blame you, either," Steve said.

"Oh, please," Julie said in a quavering voice, "please go!"

"Not until you turn around and smile at me."

Julie did not move. Steve settled his back against the door frame.

"I'm a very stubborn guy, Julie."

Dust lay along the edges of the small windows. He stared at the dry, powdery particles of earth. A crow flew over, cawing loudly. He could hear Leslie's music coming faintly from the house.

Julie's face was deeper in her hands. Her shoulders were shaking. He felt a sense of alarm. Crying was a relief to her but only up to a certain point. Beyond that lay danger. Her nerves were shot to pieces. If he didn't shake her out of it, she might be really ill.

"It's all over now, Julie," he reminded her.

She continued to sob and shake.

"You must pull yourself together," he said quietly.

"Please go," she sobbed. "Please go."

"Not when you're like this." His face was stern. He went quickly to her. He took her hands forcibly in his. They were cold. He rubbed them gently to bring back the circulation. "It's over, dear," he said, "don't you understand? Neil's safe. He's at work again. He's to stay here indefinitely with my mother. She sent that word out to you, Julie. She wants Neil to stay very much."

She looked at him through her tears. She was pitiful. He had seen her so strong, so resourceful, and now she was like a lost and frightened child.

"He tipped over, Steve. He couldn't get out. He was lying on the floor without any legs."

"Stop thinking about it, Julie."

"How can I stop? I wasn't there to help him. He needed me and I wasn't there. He might have been burned to death."

"But he wasn't."

"I failed him," she sobbed, "I failed Neil."

He took her by the shoulders and shook her. This wouldn't do. Eventually she had to go back in and face the others.

"Stop it, Julie. You're acting like a baby."

His voice was harsh and unsympathetic. It awoke her pride. She blinked back her tears and struggled to control herself.

Remorse stirred in him. To speak to poor, weary Julie like that! As if she were a coward. As if she had no right to show her womanly feelings.

"I'm a brute," he sighed, and gently took her into his arms.

He bent his head; his lips touched hers.

For a moment they stood like that; then with a gasp of dismay Julie stepped away from him.

He felt like a fool.

She smoothed her hair, wiped away the last traces of tears, then moved quickly to where the basket of eggs was standing. She picked it up and went outside.

Steve followed.

On the way to the house, Julie began to talk about Leslie. She'd never known the real Leslie before, she said. At first she hadn't thought she'd like Leslie, but that was because she was judging her then by what she thought Leslie was and not by the person she had turned out to be.

Julie said soberly, "She's been so kind and thoughtful, Steve. I'll never forget it."

"Neither will I, Julie."

Leslie was still playing the piano. The sausage meat was frying and the appetizing odour, mingled with the fragrance of coffee, came across the yard to meet them.

"I'm so glad you're going to marry her," Julie said.

"So am I."

He was smiling slightly. Guilt complex. Poor Julie.

"She's just the wife for you, Steve."

"Yes."

They did not speak again until they were almost at the house. Then he said lightly, "Don't feel distressed, Julie. What's a kiss among friends? Leslie wouldn't mind."

"I would," she said, "in Leslie's place."

"But Leslie likes you, Julie," he protested.

She did not reply to that, but she gave him an odd look as she walked ahead of him into the house.

CHAPTER XVII

By the end of the month rain terminated the forest fire peril, and the problem of Steve's future became uppermost in his mind again. Leslie had told him that her uncle was back in harness but Steve realized how mail must have accumulated during Dr. Denton's absence, and how relatively unimportant a letter from an aspirant seeking a position with the clinic would be in comparison to the manifold and far more urgent matters awaiting decision.

In the second week of November he was encouraged by a friendly though noncommittal letter from Dr. Denton saying that Steve's application was being given serious consideration. A day or two later Leslie telephoned and invited Steve to dinner at her uncle's home on Saturday, the fifteenth. She knew about the letter of application but instead of being offended because Steve had not taken her into his confidence, she sounded highly elated as she told him she had been given strict orders to leave Steve alone with her uncle in the library after dinner.

This was it, thought Steve.

He promised solemnly not to let anything interfere with the dinner engagement.

The next day, which was Thursday, the thirteenth, he was setting a broken arm when word was brought to him that he had a caller in the waiting room. He was surprised, when he finally went down, to see François Rambaud, Vin's father, waiting to see him.

The stocky, nervous little Frenchman was sitting in a dark corner holding tightly to the arm of a ragged, half-starved looking boy.

With outstretched hand Steve went quickly towards the pair.

"Well, Papa François, how are you?" Steve and the white-moustached Frenchman were good friends. Steve often dropped into the tiny variety store to buy cigarettes and pipe tobacco, and to chat with Rambaud while he was making his purchases

simply because he knew how eager Vin's father was for news of his son. Steve made a point of bringing Vin's name into the conversation in a casual but laudatory way. Vin never went near the store and, as far as Steve knew, this was Rambaud's initial visit to the hospital. He was obviously anxious to make it as short as possible. They shook hands and Steve inquired, "Who's your young friend?"

Turning his worried blue eyes towards the cowering boy and speaking rapidly in a mixture of French and English, Papa François explained. The boy's name, he said, was Clifford Webster. He was ten years old. An hour or so ago he had come into Papa François's store with four other boys, all older than he. The gang had tried to hold the Frenchman up. He had gone after them with his cane and they had scattered, all but Clifford. Clifford could not run because of pain in his stomach.

"He has the cramps, Stephen," said the Frenchman, with a look of pity in his eyes. "He vomit right on my floor and so I bring him to you instead of calling the police. I do right, n'est-ce pas?"

"Exactly right," reassured Steve. He had been watching the boy closely. He appeared undernourished and sick, and he also had the expression of the hunted. His features, which should have been innocently boyish at his age, were precociously sharp; his black eyes were narrowed and wary as they measured Steve from beneath frowning dark brows. He not only looked as if he had been systematically starved, reflected Steve, but as if his whole life had been spent escaping from one trap simply to stumble into another. Smiling, Steve said, "I'm glad to know you, Clifford."

As he put his hand out the boy instinctively ducked.

"I'm not going to hit you," said Steve kindly.

"Poor boy," murmured the Frenchman sadly, "he does not trust anyone."

"Where does he live?" asked Steve.

"He says he has no home, Stephen."

"He must live somewhere."

"I do not know," Papa François shook his head hopelessly.

"He will not talk. He is afraid of his gang. They will beat him up, he says, if he talks."

At the mention of his gang the boy began to kick and squirm.
“Lemme go! You lemme go!”

He struggled desperately for a moment, then a thin, high scream broke from him and he doubled up with both dirt scrawny hands pressed against his stomach.

“You see, Stephen?” sighed the Frenchman.

The boy’s scream had attracted attention. Miss Grieg, receptionist, sitting at her desk near the front door, was st. curiously, and Amy Thatcher, who had just emerged from director’s office, gave Steve a sharp look of disapproval as sl moved along the corridor toward the rear of the hospital.

Steve put a kind but firm hand on Clifford’s shoulder.

“I’m your friend,” he told the boy, “there’s nothing to afraid of here. If you’re not really sick we won’t keep you long. He was thinking that the pain might be the result of tainted fo the boy had eaten, but it could be something more serious an with that element of doubt in his mind he went on quietly, “No harm, is there, in occupying a good clean bed and eating regular meals for a few days while we find out about those cramps?”

There was sweat on the boy’s forehead. Steve took his own handkerchief and wiped it off. He nodded to the Frenchman and with a sigh of relief and a murmured, “Merci, merci,” Papa François left them as fast as his short, bowed legs would take him.

Steve entered the boy as a patient, assuming all responsibility, then took him up to the pediatric suite on the fourth floor. The nine to twelve rush was in full swing. Baths were being given, backs rubbed, beds and dressings changed, orders written, mail distributed.

Seating Clifford on a chair and admonishing him not to move, Steve sought out the floor supervisor and explained the situation. Well, she said doubtfully, there was one empty bed in Ward B. She supposed it would be all right for Steve to put the boy in there. He’d have to wait his turn, though.

“But this boy is sick. He’s in pain. Where’s Mrs. Wetherill?”

“She just took a patient down to the X-ray room. She has her hands full, Dr. Lovett.”

"She'll sandwich him in," declared Steve confidently, "I'll see her when she comes up."

An hour and a half later when Steve emerged from the operating room, he found Mrs. Wetherill waiting for him. As always, she looked tired but invincible. He had asked her to find out all she could about the boy, particularly where he lived and who his parents were. If he was a runaway, as Steve suspected, they would be looking for him. He hesitated to treat the boy until he knew who he was and got in touch with whoever was responsible for him.

He did not like the idea of appealing to the police.

"Well," he said, smiling down into Mrs. Wetherill's troubled face, "did you get him cleaned up and into bed?"

She nodded. "But his clothes will have to be burned."

"That's all right. We'll see that he has a new outfit when he leaves. What did you discover about him?"

Sighing, Mrs. Wetherill admitted that she hadn't been able to get much out of Clifford. He had evidently been pushed from pillar to post, she went on, in a grieved voice, but from something he had inadvertently said she believed him to be a state ward. There were two orphanages in the city, she went on, and The Springville Home for Boys. Why didn't Dr. Lovett contact these institutions?

"That's exactly what I will do, Mrs. Wetherill, and thanks a lot for what you did."

With a trace of indignation, she said, "Why, it was the very least I could do."

Steve went up at once to see the boy.

"How long you goin' to keep me here?" Clifford asked suspiciously.

For some indefinable reason, he looked even more pathetic with his face clean and his hair neatly combed. Perhaps, thought Steve, drawing up a chair and sitting down beside the bed, it was because the matted hair and dirt had drawn attention from the boy's caved-in temples and hollow cheeks which were now so alarmingly apparent.

"Oh, probably not more than forty-eight hours," said Steve cheerfully. That should tell the story, he thought.

His fingers were on the boy's pulse. It was racing but that could come from fear.

He turned down the bedclothes.

"What you goin' to do?" Clifford shrank from Steve's touch.

"Just make a brief examination."

"Will it hurt?"

"Not a bit."

With hands and stethoscope Steve went carefully over the boy's emaciated form. Clifford was markedly underweight; there was some distension of the abdomen on which Steve noted the whitish scar of an old incision; and there was also a slight heart murmur, indicating that at some time in his life Clifford had had that dreaded disease of childhood, rheumatic fever.

The boy's heart pounded during the examination but he lay quiet, his black eyes staring up into Steve's face.

"You're a good patient," praised Steve, as he covered Clifford up. "When did they take your appendix out?"

"Last year."

"Who did it?"

"I dunno." The boy turned his head restlessly from side to side. His lips trembled. "It was fierce."

Steve sat down beside him again. The boy had been frightened by his previous experience with doctors. Care must be taken not to repeat that.

"Do you remember what hospital you went to?"

"No." Stubby fingers with bitten nails clutched at the sheet. "You goin' to cut me up again?"

"Oh, I don't think so, Clifford," answered Steve quickly. "What have you been living on? Hot dogs and pickles mostly?"

The boy started to say something, then quickly changed his mind, his face assuming a guarded look, as if somebody had suddenly tugged at his arm and told him to keep his mouth shut.

Some of the boys in the ward were raising themselves in their beds to see what was going on. Steve deliberated for a moment, then deciding that he might find out more about the boy later if

he didn't press him now, he told Clifford to take it easy and that he would see him again in a little while.

The boy made no reply. He turned his face to the wall.

Steve ordered the routine laboratory tests.

He did some telephoning, the last call bearing unexpectedly fruitful results and as a consequence, when he was free at two o'clock, he got in his car and drove the short distance from the hospital to The Springville Home for Boys, a large brick building impressive on the outside, dismal on the inside.

"So you have Clifford in the hospital, have you, Dr. Lovett?" said Mr. Mabry, the superintendent, a bland-eyed, unctuous type of individual who looked as if he might have got his job through political pull. "I suppose you've already discovered that the boy is an incorrigible?"

"No," said Steve stiffly, "I can't say I have. He's scared of everybody, but he seems like a nice little kid."

"I fear we know Clifford better than you do," declared Mr. Mabry.

"What do you mean?"

"Let me read to you from the records, Dr. Lovett." The superintendent had been sitting sideways in his swivel chair. He swung around to consult some papers on his scarred oak desk, murmuring that he was afraid it was a case of bad blood inherited.

Father a drunkard, read Mr. Mabry, mother a burlesque actress. Clifford deserted by both parents when he was a year old. Left in a rooming house and eventually turned over to the state. Extremely difficult to handle. Placed in several boarding homes but always sent back because unmanageable. Bright in his studies but inclined to steal.

"What has he stolen?" asked Steve.

"Food from our own kitchen. It happened several times."

"Perhaps he was hungry."

Mr. Mabry showed himself suddenly to be humane. "He might have been," he admitted, "I remember that when I was a boy my mother could never seem to keep me filled up." He added quickly, "But we must maintain discipline, doctor."

About two weeks ago, went on Mr. Mabry, Clifford ran away.

When he didn't come back within a day or two, a search was started by the police. The boy had probably wandered around for a few days, opined the superintendent, and then joined forces with this gang of young hoodlums who had tried to rob the Frenchman.

"Well, he's sick now," stated Steve, "and I'd like to keep him under observation for a few days if you've no objection."

None whatever, replied Mr. Mabry promptly. Clifford was fortunate to have fallen into such good hands. What if it came to a question of operation? asked Steve. Would Mr. Mabry give him written authority to do it?

"Do you think the boy needs an operation?" asked the superintendent, looking thoughtfully at a bowl of red and yellow bittersweet on his desk.

He didn't know, said Steve, probably not, but there was just a chance that what looked like simple infection might actually be a case of intestinal obstruction.

After another moment or two of cogitation, Mr. Mabry drew paper towards him and dipped his pen in ink.

"Let us know how Clifford gets along, doctor," he said, as he scrawled his signature.

After a few more inquiries into the boy's life and his previous hospital experience, Steve left. Later on that afternoon he dropped into the laboratory to see if the tests on Clifford had been completed.

Lena smiled at him as he entered.

"I was expecting you." She reached for several slips of paper lying near her on the long table at which she sat. "Here they are."

"How'd you get along with him?" asked Steve, taking the papers from her hand and noting the sparkle in her eyes. Lena had not only found herself but she had found Neil. Steve knew that twice, lately, Lena had been to Maine by bus with Julie. He hadn't learned it from Julie, because Julie had been avoiding him since that day in his mother's hennery, but he had talked over the telephone with his mother and she had told him, with little chuckles of delight, of the instant attraction between Neil and Lena.

"Why, I got along with Clifford just fine," Lena was saying.
"He didn't battle you?"

"A little, but not for long. He makes my heart ache, Dr. Lovett."

"Mine, too, Lena."

Nellie walked into the room at that moment, demanding, "Who makes your heart ache?"

Steve said, "We were speaking of Clifford Webster, my patient."

"Oh," said Nellie, stepping briskly around the table and sliding on to her stool. "I think I'll run up and see him when I get a chance. Will it be all right with you?"

Steve nodded emphatically.

"You bet."

The change in Nellie, he thought, was even more marked than that in her sister. Nellie had taken her tongue out of her cheek, for one thing, and the bitterness was gone from her conversation. Furthermore, she was doing her hair in a different way and it was darned becoming. It was still braided but the ear mats he had detested were gone, and in their place was a single braid, worn high, coronet-fashion. It gave her a regal look.

Now that Lena was safe, thought Steve, Nellie could unbend. She could be friendly. She could even think about prettying herself up.

Lena spoke up in her soft voice.

"The other boys in the ward were asking him questions when I was up there but he wouldn't talk to them. He acts afraid."

"He is," said Steve, who was studying the papers he held.

"Of what?" inquired Nellie.

"Everything and everybody. Hello, here's a coincidence." Steve looked up quickly at Lena. "Cliff's blood and mine are the same type."

"Really?"

"Yes. Rh negative."

"That's a rare type. You would be different, wouldn't you?"

"It gives me an idea," murmured Steve.

He went out of the laboratory and up to the room where they

kept the blood bank. Cliff was markedly anaemic. If it came to an operation the boy's chances of survival would be much improved by a transfusion beforehand. A nurse was in the room. Steve told her what he wanted and then stretched out on a narrow cot while she drew a pint of blood from his veins. When it was in a flask bearing Clifford's name and stored away in the bank, Steve felt decidedly easier in his mind.

The chief problem now was to gain the boy's confidence.

He was seated beside Clifford's bed the next afternoon when Julie walked in, almost invisible, except for her smooth dark head and pretty legs, behind the basket of fruit she was carrying.

Steve sprang up.

"Now I have two of my favourite people together," he said, as he relieved Julie of her burden. He was touched at her coming here with such a lavish gift for his protégé. He knew Julie's tender heart. She must have imagined Cliff lying lonely and neglected while all the other boys in the surrounding beds were piling up presents from their relatives and friends. As a matter of fact, on the table beside Cliff's bed there were a score of gifts already; some books from Lena, a harmonica from Nellie, candy from Papa François, a polka dot necktie from Mrs. Wetherill, a jack-knife from Burt Saunders. Steve cleared a place and set the basket of fruit down, saying, "You never expected anything as gorgeous as this, did you, Cliff?"

The boy maintained a sullen silence, hardly glancing at the basket of fruit, yet a moment before he had been on the verge of smiling at some remark of Steve's.

"How do you feel, Clifford?" asked Julie, bending over him.

He would not look at her or speak.

"He's feeling much better," Steve said, "a few cramps just to keep him company, but I imagine by tomorrow he'll be up and around, eh, Cliff?"

The boy said nothing. He stared at Steve as if wondering what was going to happen to him when he got up and around.

Julie remarked, "I hear he'll have a brand new suit of clothes to wear out of here."

"He sure will."

"That's wonderful," she murmured. She was silent for a moment, standing with her hand in her pocket and her eyes on Cliff's pinched face. "Has Dr. Morton seen Cliff?" she asked at last.

Steve nodded. "We went over him together, didn't we, Cliff?" The boy said nothing. He lay motionless with his eyelids down and his cheeks sucked in. His manners were atrocious, thought Steve, but who could blame him? He'd never been taught politeness, never been taught much of anything. He had a good brain; all he needed was to be led in the right direction; but to date nobody had apparently had the time or taken the pains to discover the real boy beneath that protective shell of perpetual sulkiness. Steve had caught glimpses that were encouraging, but to everybody else Clifford's attitude was the same as he was now exhibiting towards Julie. He was making it evident that he wished she'd go away and not come back. Steve said, "Dr. Morton's going to see him again tomorrow."

The ward was fully occupied. Every boy but Cliff had his quota of visitors. They all had parents, aunts, cousins, friends. The ward resounded with their loud, boyish voices recounting their hospital experiences.

Cliff was so out of it, thought Steve.

He had been out of it all his life.

"Well, Cliff," said Julie at last, "I'd better be running along if I don't want to be tossed out bodily. Goodbye. Do what the doctor says, won't you?"

She laid her hand for an instant on the boy's. He jerked away as if she'd held a lighted cigarette against his flesh.

She smiled and walked away. With a murmured, "See you later, Cliff," Steve followed her.

When he got outside the ward he saw that Julie was some distance away and walking fast.

"Hold on, Julie," he called out, "I want a word with you."

She slowed down, then came to a stop.

"What's the big idea?" he asked, as he came up to her. "Why are you always running away from me lately?"

"I'm not, Steve." She smiled at him faintly, then fastened her

gaze on a maid pushing a truck of clean linen along the corridor towards them.

"It looks like it," he said, frowning at her.

She was thinner and quieter than she used to be. It could be concern over Neil, but Neil was happier than he'd been in a long time with his painting and his Lena. Was it Vin? Steve asked himself. Vin was after Julie again, trying to date her up. Vin had the use of a car now, a handsome Packard convertible. It was registered in the name of Rhea Gardner, but Vin was the virtual owner of it. Mrs. Gardner had to have a daily dose of insulin and she considered Vin the only one competent to give it to her. The car enabled him to travel back and forth between the hospital and Mrs. Gardner's home. It also afforded Vin an opportunity to take pretty nurses for rides. Steve had heard him urging Julie to go out with him.

"Is Rhead annoying you?" Steve asked abruptly.

Julie flushed, then said with a trace of impatience, "I'm all right, Steve."

"You don't look it."

Perhaps it was Maddison, he thought. The operating room supervisor had them all on edge, particularly Julie. Lately, Maddison had made one of her most ridiculous rules. Still maintaining that her chief objective was to save money for the hospital, Maddison had decreed that only one vial of catgut could be broken at a time. That meant that but two needles could be threaded at once and as a consequence every operation was being held up while capsules were broken, catgut cut and needles threaded.

And it was Julie who had to bear the brunt of the surgeon's impatience.

"Maddison getting under your skin?" he asked.

"No more than usual," Julie shrugged as she consulted her watch. "I really must go, Steve."

"What's so important?"

"I want to pick out a kit."

"You mean you want to get away from me."

She shook her head emphatically.

"Oh, yes, you do," he said. He thought he knew now what was the matter with her. "Why don't you drop it, Julie?"

"Drop what?"

"That guilty feeling you've been lugging around ever since that day I tried to comfort you in my mother's hennerly."

Julie laughed and he winced at the sound.

"Why, Steve, you funny man, I'd forgotten all about that."

"Oh," he muttered, feeling the blood rush to his face as he realized how conceited he must have sounded. He was out of sorts and he didn't know exactly why unless it had to do with the fact that his dinner engagement with Leslie came tomorrow night, and he dreaded leaving the hospital while Clifford was under his care. He had promised that nothing should interfere with the engagement and he intended to keep that promise. He had to. His whole future was at stake, but he wished fervently that the two events hadn't coincided as they had. Recovering his composure somewhat, he asked, "What do you think of the boy?"

"He's terribly pathetic, Steve."

Steve nodded. "Right out of the gutter, Julie. It was kind of you to bring him the basket of fruit. He wasn't very gracious about it."

"That's all right," Julie said quickly, "life hasn't conditioned him to be gracious."

"No, he's had it tough, poor kid."

There was a nurse emerging from a flower room with a bouquet of multi-coloured chrysanthemums in a tall green vase. Steve watched her as she moved along with it. She disappeared, and his eyes went back to Julie's face as he went on, "Everybody Cliff's ever come in contact with has apparently let him down. I've heard and read a lot about juvenile delinquency but I've never had a chance to see the yeast of it at work in a kid before."

"It worries you, doesn't it, Steve?"

"Yes." He glanced down towards the nurses' station where the telephone had been ringing steadily for several minutes. When he spoke again his voice was harsh. "What's the use of fixing

him up physically if, when we're through, we toss him back from whence he came? He'd be better off dead."

"Do you feel that he's your responsibility, Steve?" asked Julie, after a pause.

"In a way, yes," Steve replied.

Shortly afterwards Julie left him and he went back to sit with Clifford.

CHAPTER XVIII

"So you're the dark horse Leslie's fallen in love with," remarked Elaine Harrison, looking up at Steve smilingly from beneath a thick tangle of dark eyelashes. They had been left together in a far corner of the drawing room while Leslie went to greet a tardy guest. "We've all been simply dying to meet you, Dr. Lovett," confided Elaine, as she ashed her cigarette with an exaggeratedly long, glittering fingernail.

"The pleasure is all mine," murmured Steve.

"Are you going to marry Leslie?" asked Elaine audaciously.

She was so friendly and bright with her round, china-blue eyes and her little pug nose that he couldn't resent her impertinence. She was a tiny person about Leslie's age, very closely fitted into a square-necked black dinner gown.

He grinned down at her and said, "Why don't you ask Leslie?"

"But I have asked her, darling," pouted Elaine, "and she referred me to you." She added wistfully, "I would like to be the first to spread the news."

Steve laughed and put down his untouched cocktail on a convenient table. He was doing his best to have a good time, but he wasn't succeeding very well. He couldn't get Clifford out of his mind. Physically, the boy seemed better but something had happened that morning that had thrown him completely off balance emotionally.

It was during rounds.

It had been a difficult assignment for Steve to sell himself to Clifford, but he had at last succeeded in winning at least a modicum of the boy's confidence. Cliff's hostility towards the nurses, towards anybody who chanced to drop in to see him, and, particularly, towards the other boys in the ward had continued unabated, but with Steve Cliff was beginning to be natural. He was still watchful, as if he expected disillusionment at any moment, but he unbent with Steve and even smiled when he saw Steve coming.

Then, that morning, Vin had called Cliff a guttersnipe.

"How's your pet guttersnipe progressing, Steve?"

Cliff had heard and so had the other boys in the ward.

Piqued by Cliff's steady refusal to accept their friendly advances, the other boys had been waiting for something like this. They seized upon it with typical boyish cruelty.

"Hey, Snipey! How are you, Snipey? Any butts down there in the gutter?"

It had gone on, at intervals, all during the day.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Cliff," Steve had counselled, but he had known only too well what the laughter and the jeering must be doing to Cliff.

To make matters worse, there had been this dinner engagement which Steve had to keep. He had literally sneaked out of the hospital, and now he could only trust to luck that the boy wouldn't need him or ask to speak to him during his absence.

"Well, if you won't confide in me, you won't," Elaine was sighing, "I can see that you're one of those strong, silent men." She had finished her cocktail and was eating the cherry. She said, eyeing Steve's full glass, "Aren't you drinking this evening?"

"No, I'm on the wagon."

"Why?"

"I have a patient I'm a trifle worried about."

"Oh." She stretched out a small hand. "May I have your cocktail, then?"

"Certainly."

She took it from him, observing happily that she had hollow legs and never showed her drinking.

"We'll pretend to Leslie that it went down your throat instead of mine, Dr. Lovett."

"Why?"

"Because she wouldn't like your staying cold sober at her party. She wants her guests to eat, drink and be merry."

"Leslie understands," he said, amused.

He looked around the great room, his eyes searching for Leslie. Everything was about the same as it had been on his first visit here. Not as many people—there were to be twenty guests for dinner, Leslie had said—but the same atmosphere of music, motion, laughter, and scent of roses mingling with the cigarette smoke.

Dr. Denton, with whom Steve had exchanged a few impersonal remarks during his tour of the room with Leslie, stood about where he had stood that other time; Jocelyn and the maids were circulating among the guests serving cocktails and hors-d'œuvres.

Yes, it was all about the same yet it looked different to Steve tonight, perhaps because he couldn't help seeing it with Cliff's eyes. What would the street urchin's reaction be to a house like this? Awe? Yes. Resentment? No, Cliff wasn't old enough yet to have become really bitter. He only pretended to be that way. That would come later if nothing was done for him now. He was still in the unmoulded stage.

Awe, then, and what else?

A chance to steal, of course.

Cliff leaned towards crime because it was the easiest way to satisfy his longing for excitement and his empty stomach, but he wasn't a criminal yet.

"Tell me about your sick patient, Dr. Lovett," Elaine said. "Is she somebody wealthy like Rhea Gardner?"

"No." He must make an opportunity to talk to Leslie tonight about Clifford, he thought. He had told her a little about the boy over the telephone but she had been in a hurry, and he wanted her to know more. He wanted her advice about what he ought to do.

"Rhea isn't present tonight," remarked Elaine brightly.

"Isn't she?"

"Oh, no, she's put herself beyond the pale. It's just as well she's going to Florida for the winter. She's boycotted around here because of what she did to Leslie's uncle."

His eyes had at last found Leslie. She was standing with Dick Kane near an immense potted plant of some kind. Steve's gaze rested on her proudly. What a vision! Her gown was a cloud of grey tulle liberally sprinkled with gold sequins. Her hair lay close to her head in pale golden bands. She was wearing the tawny yellow of topazes at her throat and on her slender, supple wrists.

"They make a stunning couple, don't they, Dr. Lovett?"

"Yes," he said generously, "they do."

"Aren't you jealous of Dick?"

"Should I be?"

She said frankly, "We all thought Leslie was going to marry Dick. She's still very fond of him. They say he was badly broken up when she decided in your favour."

"I'm sorry to hear that," murmured Steve.

He was becoming weary of Elaine's chatter, and it was with relief that he saw Leslie start across the room towards them, having parted from Dr. Kane with a smile and a pat on the latter's arm.

"You looked as if you were having a real heart-to-heart talk," laughed Leslie. She tucked her hand in Steve's arm; her eyes looked searchingly into his for a moment. "Are you worried, Steve?"

"A little."

She frowned slightly. "That boy?"

"Yes. I'd like to talk to you about him, Leslie."

"Not now, Steve, later." Leslie's attention had suddenly become riveted on the tall, commanding figure of a woman in a gown of brilliant blue, who had just come into the room and who was talking animatedly to Dick Kane. "That's the wife of Mark Keller, the journalist," Leslie explained, "she's just come back from a world tour with him. They've had some amazing adventures. I hope she'll talk to us later about them. I was lucky to get her. I must go right over."

Looking down into Leslie's face, Steve saw that the subject of Clifford bored her. She would listen to his story when she had plenty of time but it would not touch her deeply. She could have let him say just a few words about the boy while they were standing there together, before she rushed off to meet her celebrity, he thought almost resentfully as his eyes followed Leslie's progress across the room, but perhaps any mention of a boy like Cliff on such an occasion as this would offend Leslie.

Nevertheless, when they were beside each other later at the long dinner table, Steve dared to broach the subject again.

Having finished with the lobster bisque, they were on the second course which happened to be chilled brook trout in aspic. He was thinking, as his fork pierced the gelatin, what fun a kid could have fishing some of the trout streams in Maine. Cliff knew nothing about the woods. A little four-ounce rod, Steve was thinking, a canoe, a camp site nearby. The sun on the water, the wind in the trees, the clean, good smell of nature all around.

He could see Cliff's eyes when the kid landed his first trout. Cook it over an open fire. Not like this, though. Steve stared down at his plate distastefully. Trout in aspic was sacrilege. The little spotted beauties ought to be rolled in cornmeal and fried in salt pork over a wood fire.

"He'd like that," Steve said, forgetting himself and speaking aloud, "it would give him a thrill."

Leslie finished what she was saying to the gentleman on her right, addressed a quick remark to somebody farther down at the table, then turning to Steve, asking, "Did you speak to me?"

"No, but I'd like to."

"Well, here I am," Leslie said, smiling, "what pearls of wisdom have you to utter?"

"May I talk to you about Cliff?" he asked, half apologetically.

He caught a sound that could have been a sigh, but he decided it wasn't because Leslie was still smiling.

"Go right ahead," she murmured.

He talked for some minutes while Leslie listened patiently, breaking in once to tell Steve to move a trifle so that Jocelyn could refill his water glass. When he paused, Leslie nodded her

head sympathetically and said, "The mental side's important, isn't it? He needs aptitude tests and all that sort of thing. Of course you want to help him, Steve. Why not a good psychiatrist and then a well-recommended military school?"

"It's too bad you were saddled with him, darling," Leslie went on, "there are agencies to take care of children like that." She added, "Homes, orphanages."

"Have you ever been in one?" asked Steve quietly.

"No."

"I have."

"Really?"

He had failed to interest her in the boy and there was no use talking about Cliff any more. He realized that what he did for the boy he would have to do alone, as far as Leslie was concerned. Perhaps if she saw Cliff—no, that wouldn't make any difference and she would probably refuse to see him, anyway. He was something so far outside her circle that the only feeling she could possibly have towards him was boredom. But Cliff was a human being and he deserved to be treated like one.

Somewhat later, during the roast turkey course, Mrs. Murdock, on Steve's left, inquired brightly if he was planning to attend next year's Kentucky Derby. She never missed it, she said, and in her opinion everybody should go. Steve murmured an answer and she went on talking but he had ceased to listen because he thought he had heard the distant ringing of the telephone. It was probably his imagination, he mused, but it made him more acutely aware of Cliff and the boy's unhappy predicament, and he sat straining his ears to see if he could catch the sound again amid the steady rise and fall of the voices around him.

He was admiring the perfect line of Leslie's profile and waiting for her to finish what she was saying to Dick Kane, who sat opposite her at the table, when Jocelyn murmured in his ear that he was wanted on the telephone.

Steve excused himself and got up quickly, following the butler out of the dining room, across the hall and into the library where the telephone stood on a table, the receiver off.

"Hello?"

"Steve, this is Julie." Her voice was low and tense. "I hate to disturb you but Cliff's very ill."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Steve, tightening his hold on the receiver.

"He's markedly distended and he's been throwing up," said Julie's worried voice. "His pulse is 140. Dr. Rhead saw him and ordered him to the operating room."

"Why didn't he notify me first?" demanded Steve.

"He said you wouldn't want to be bothered."

"But Cliff isn't his patient, Julie. It wouldn't be Vin's responsibility if anything happened to the boy."

"That's why I called you, Steve," she said quickly. "Cliff's making a terrible fuss. He doesn't want anyone to operate on him but you, and when he found you'd left the hospital he . . ."

"He thought I'd let him down," broke in Steve.

"Yes."

"Stall the operation off until I can get there, Julie."

"I'll do my best, Steve. Are you coming right away?"

"Yes."

He hung up. The palms of his hands were moist with perspiration and he dried them on his handkerchief as he strode from the library towards the front hall. To his annoyance he saw that Jocelyn had disappeared, evidently having gone back to his duties in the dining room. Steve had wanted to send word back to Leslie, explaining his sudden disappearance. He decided that he would have to go and speak to her himself and he was about to do so when he heard her voice calling him.

"Steve, where are you?"

"In the hall," he called back. He stepped into the coat closet to find his hat and coat.

"What are you doing out here?" she demanded, as she put in an appearance beside the closet door.

"Cliff's much worse," he explained, staring at a score of grey, brown and taupe felt hats on a shelf and wondering which was his. They were all shaped alike. His was dark grey. He eventually found it and began to hunt for his topcoat, explaining, "I'll

have to operate on him after all but I'll be back as soon as it's over. I'm sorry I have to go."

"You mustn't leave now, Steve," said Leslie.

It was not a plea; it was a command.

"I can't go back on him, Leslie."

"What about me, Steve? Is it fair to go back on me?"

"I hoped you'd understand."

"Isn't that asking a good deal, considering what this evening means to me?" She added, "And to you, too?"

He found his coat and stepped out of the closet. He knew that he was spoiling the dinner for her and he wished he could have avoided it. He got into his coat, sighing as he said, "My intentions were of the best, Leslie. Naturally I couldn't foresee this."

A sense of discouragement had settled down upon him. He seemed incapable of reaching her heart this evening.

"Vin is there, isn't he?" she asked coldly.

"Yes, but Cliff doesn't like him."

"I don't see why that's important, Steve. Vin's competent to do the operation, isn't he?"

"If he keeps his head." Steve was thinking of Rhea Gardner's operation.

"Why shouldn't he keep his head?" asked Leslie impatiently.

"I don't know, but that's beside the point. This is my case and I must see it through."

"I think you're exaggerating the boy's need of you, Steve."

He shook his head as he moved towards the front door.

"Who called you from the hospital?" asked Leslie. "Julie?"

"Yes."

"I thought so."

He turned quickly around. Leslie was standing near the carved pedestal on which was the white porcelain statue of the goddess Kouan-in. In the subdued light of the hall, her eyes looked as deep-set and expressionless as those of the statue. She had spoken softly and by the very quietness of her voice he realized how angry she was.

"I told you a long time ago, Steve, that you knew comparatively nothing about women. I repeat it now. Julie's

in love with you. She's doing this to get you away from me."

"That's ridiculous," he said sharply, adding, "I thought you liked Julie."

"Never, Steve."

"But that day in Maine, when we stood near the ruins of her home—I saw you put your arm around her, Leslie."

"She was in trouble and I was sorry for her. Women can feel pity for each other even when they hate each other at heart."

Out of his bewilderment came a sudden memory of the kiss he had given Julie. She had felt so guilty and he had laughed at her and said, "Leslie wouldn't mind . . . Leslie likes you," and then he recalled the odd look Julie had given him when he said those words.

"And you're in love with Julie," went on Leslie in that same soft, quiet voice.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Steve said angrily. He put his hand on the knob of the door. "I can't stand here arguing. I'll do the job as quickly as I can and come back."

Leslie's cool voice said, "Wait, Steve, there's one thing more."

"Well?"

"If you leave now I don't want you to come back."

"Don't say that," he begged.

"I am saying it, Steve."

"What kind of a doctor would I be if I forgot my patient's needs?" he cried. "What kind of a husband would I make? Not the sort you'd want, Leslie, nor the kind of man your uncle would want on his clinic staff. Believe me, I don't *want* to leave you."

"Then why do you?"

"Because I'd hate myself all the rest of my life if I didn't. I've been thinking of Clifford as standing at a crossroads," he went on hoarsely, "one way leading to decency, the other to disgrace. Well, I'm standing at one, too, Leslie. It's a question of self-survival, I suppose, to think of yourself first but it's not good medicine. I just seem to have found that out."

She laughed mockingly.

"Sir Galahad with a scalpel in his hand! All right, Steve," she lifted her chin and smiled at him, "run along but don't come back." He started to speak but she said, her eyes flashing a look almost of hatred at him, "I mean it. *Don't come back.*" With her customary grace she moved away from the statue and started down the hall in the direction of the drawing room. Over her shoulder she said with great distinctness, "I'll tell Uncle Walt you changed your mind about the clinic."

He opened the door quickly and stepped outside. The cold November air was in his face as he ran down the steps, automatically feeling in his coat pocket for his car keys. He found them. His car was at the curb. He got in and drove off.

The appalling fact was that Leslie had meant what she said. He had lost her, and he had lost his chances of getting into the Dental Clinic.

He laughed grimly at himself as he drove along.

CHAPTER XIX

He could hear Cliff's thin screaming before he got to the operating room.

The boy was lying on the table, tears streaming from his eyes, fighting Vin as the latter struggled to hold him. The room was close and smelled of ether. Steam was coming from a sterilizer; there was a sound of water boiling. A nurse was busy with sponges. Over on one side of the room Julie and Gretta Maddison were having a heated argument. Zeller was frowning and pottering with the anaesthesia machine. Burt Saunders was standing across the table from Vin, looking as if he wished he were any place but where he was.

"We'll have to strap him down," Vin was saying angrily.

Steve strode to the table and shoved Vin aside.

"Hello, Cliff, what's all the racket about?"

The boy stopped screaming. His terror-filled black eyes stared out of his wizened face at Steve. They had medicated him to ease the pain but he was still very much awake.

"You walked out on me. You said you was my friend and then you walked off and left me. You went to a party. You didn't care what happened to me."

"You're wrong there, Cliff. I care a great deal what happens to you."

"Why'd you go off and leave me then?"

"It was my night off."

"You might have told me you were going," choked the boy.

"It was my mistake that I didn't. You had a right to know. I apologize, Cliff."

He waited. The boy said nothing.

"I didn't enjoy the party, Cliff. I was thinking too much about you."

He waited again. Would the boy believe him?

The boy's hand was clutching the side of the table. His nails were bitten to the quick. He said, grudgingly, "I guess you couldn't get out of it, huh?"

Steve nodded. "You could put it that way."

There was a silence during which Vin murmured sarcastically, "Will somebody please play *Hearts and Flowers*?" Julie and Maddison had stopped their argument. Zeller was slowly wheeling the anaesthesia machine towards the table.

"You goin' to cut me up?" quavered Cliff.

Steve pushed the hair back from the boy's sweating forehead.

"If you trust me enough, Cliff," he said.

The boy sent a fearful glance in Vin's direction.

"He ain't goin' to do it, is he?"

"Definitely not."

The boy was calmer now. "Will it hurt?"

"You won't feel a thing," promised Steve, "if you do exactly as we say."

"Are you goin' to put me to sleep?"

"Dr. Zeller is."

The boy's puny body shook. "Will I wake up again?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

Steve looked gravely down into the tear-stained face. Cliff had decided to trust him. He had won the first round, but there were others to follow. Who could say what would happen before the operation was over? With a sense of relief he remembered the flask of his own blood stored away for Cliff's use.

He said steadily, "I promise."

The boy managed a smile.

"Okay, Doc, I'm ready."

There was a touch of bravado in his manner that affected Steve even more deeply than Clifford's terror had.

Now it's up to me, Steve thought.

He nodded to Zeller, and the anaesthetist sat down on his stool at Clifford's head.

Steve moved quickly across the room and addressed Gretta Maddison. "We'll transfuse him before operation. Get that blood that's marked with his name, will you?"

She was smiling faintly and her green eyes were malicious.

"I would like to accommodate you if I could, Dr. Lovett."

"Why can't you?"

"Because the blood is no longer in the bank."

"Where is it, then?"

"On the floor in the room where the blood bank is," she said deliberately. "It got spilled." Her eyebrows lifted as she looked at Julie, who was approaching them. "I wouldn't know just how but I suppose it was carelessness." The supervisor added, "Greenwood offered to get it and the next thing I knew she came in saying the flask had slipped from her hands as she was getting it from the bank. Odd sort of accident, wasn't it?"

Steve said nothing for a moment. He knew quite well that there was more to the spilling of the blood than there appeared to be on the surface. Julie was not careless by nature, and nobody knew better than she how he had counted on that blood in case of an operation on Cliff.

Julie came close to him. He had never seen her look so white and agitated. Her face was like a mask behind which she was

hiding. Scarcely moving her lips, she murmured, "I'm terribly sorry, Steve."

He touched her briefly on the arm.

"It doesn't matter. Plenty more where that came from. We'll go ahead with the operation and transfuse him afterwards."

She looked at him gratefully and for a moment his mind went back to the recent scene with Leslie in the hall of the Denton house. He wanted to think about that. He wanted to ponder on those words of Leslie's about Julie caring for him. He would have liked to get to work on it immediately, but he couldn't afford to—not until he had kept faith with Cliff and brought the boy through the operation safely.

He said, "Let's get going, Julie."

There was a band somewhere that was causing the intestinal obstruction.

Steve had made the incision; his fingers were feeling carefully around to locate that band. How small Cliff was on the table! Nothing to the boy but skin and bones. That blood would have given him a big boost. Well, it was too late to think about that, Steve told himself. He must concentrate on the band. *Where was it?* When the operation was over he would lie down beside Cliff and let his blood flow directly into the boy's veins. He would tell Cliff about it afterwards, he would say it made them blood brothers.

"Found it yet?" asked Vin, who was assisting him.

"No."

"Maybe my guess was wrong."

"He had all the symptoms."

Burt Saunders, who was standing beside Steve, holding a retractor, murmured, "Poor little devil."

Steve looked at Zeller. Zeller nodded, as if satisfied with the boy's condition. Behind Steve, Maddison was moving noisily about. She was still angry, he realized, but why should she be upset over the loss of the blood? It wasn't like her to be worried over anything that affected the patient. There was something

else here that he didn't understand, he decided, feeling anew the resentment-charged atmosphere of the room.

Well, whatever it was, he mustn't try to figure it out now. Later, he would get the whole story from Julie. At the moment he had his hands full.

His fingers found the band. He breathed a sigh of relief and began to divide it, bending forward to see better what he was doing. He still had ahead of him the unnecessarily long drawn-out process of sewing up which Maddison had lately forced upon the surgeons and he dreaded it. He wanted the operation over; the transfusion given; the boy safely back in bed.

He would have a special for Cliff the first few days, he decided. Fannie Burbank was the nurse for the job if he could get her.

He became suddenly aware that Vin was addressing him.

"I don't expect to be around here much longer, Steve."

Vin's manner was elaborately casual.

Casting a quick glance at him, Steve said, "What are you getting at? You'll be here until April, won't you?"

"No."

"You're quitting?" asked Burt Saunders.

"Yes."

"When?" asked Steve. He was ready now to sew up. He extended his hand for a needle and waited for Vin's answer. He was not surprised that Vin would leave the hospital in the lurch; nothing about Vin could surprise him now.

"Next week," declared Vin, as Steve began to put in stitches.

Vin went on to say that a patient of his was going south and she wanted him to go along as her personal physician. All expenses paid and a barrel of fun besides, Vin added.

"But you can't walk out on the hospital like that, can you?" asked Burt Saunders in a shocked voice.

What was to stop him? inquired Vin airily, not the slightest hint of compunction in voice or manner.

Nobody spoke. The minutes passed.

Steve held his hand out for a second needle. Julie gave it to him. He went on stitching.

He could stay on here for a while, he was thinking. He could

stay on if they wanted him to. Now that the Denton Clinic had been crossed off for him he was in no rush to get away.

His thoughts went on.

Burt Saunders had improved. He was a fair surgeon now and eager to learn. Not as good a technician as Vin, but more trustworthy, more conscientious.

Steve thought, Saunders and I could hold the fort while they looked around for another resident.

He wondered how Julie would feel about his staying on.

He must ask her later.

He wanted to talk to her about Cliff, too. He knew definitely now that he was going to sponsor the boy's new approach to life, not only because he felt it his duty, but because he liked Cliff enough to want to keep the boy under his own guidance.

He finished with the second needle and was prepared to be patient while he waited for a capsule to be broken in order that Julie might rethread for him, but to his surprise there was no waiting. She had a threaded needle ready and as he took it from her hand Steve realized what she had done. To help him get through with the operation as quickly as possible, Julie had defied Maddison and broken the supervisor's latest rule. That was what they had been arguing about so heatedly when he had first entered the operating room. That was the cause of Maddison's angry banging around the room.

He looked at Julie. For a fleeting moment, while his heart beat quickly, his eyes rested on the dark, hyphen-straight brows, the thick brown lashes against the pale, clear skin, the straight bridge of Julie's nose.

"And you're in love with Julie," Leslie had said.

How had she known? How had she guessed before even he had?

He was breathing fast; his lips were dry beneath his mask.

He felt Vin's eyes on him and he steadied down and went on with the operation.

When it was completed and the transfusion over, he asked Julie to meet him downstairs, outside the hospital. He saw Cliff into bed. The boy was in good shape, and after Steve had got

in touch with Fannie Burbank and knew that she was on her way over to take the case, he went quickly down the stairs and out into the hospital yard.

It was a dark, mysterious night unlit by stars. It suited his mood. There was a feeling of snow in the air. The wind blew through the tops of the trees with the sound of a giant broom going after the corners of the sky. He could smell nature, strong and vibrant around him.

He lit a cigarette and walked up and down impatiently until at last he saw the hospital door open and Julie come out.

He went eagerly to meet her.

CHAPTER XX

"Shouldn't you be getting back to Leslie?" asked Julie, as Steve took her arm, drawing her out of the light and into the darkness. "You don't want to miss any more of the party than you can help, Steve."

He said, "I'm satisfied to be right where I am." The house of Walter Denton seemed as far away as the moon; the clinic didn't exist; Leslie was somebody he had known in another life. It was strange; he could hardly believe it, but it was true. He had never felt as content in his life. "Cigarette, Julie?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

He gave her a cigarette and struck a match, still holding her arm.

"But I don't understand," Julie murmured in a puzzled way. "I should think you'd want to get back there as quickly as you could."

"Why?"

"Wasn't this the night Dr. Denton was going to talk to you about a place on the clinic staff?"

"How did you know?" he countered.

"Your mother told me, Steve."

"Oh."

They walked up and down in silence for a few minutes, then Julie said earnestly, "I wish you'd hurry back there, Steve."

"Don't you like my company?" he asked reproachfully.

She said quickly, "You know I do, but I don't want you to miss out on your big chance."

He pressed her arm. "You're an unselfish person, Julie."

"I know what it means to you, Steve."

As he moved beside her, Steve was sharply aware that nothing meant anything to him any more unless it included Julie.

She sighed and he asked, "What is it? Tired?"

"A little."

"You should be."

She was wearing her navy wool coat over her shoulders. She shivered suddenly and they stopped walking while she slipped her arms into the sleeves. As they began to move slowly back and forth again, she said ruefully, "Well, I'll probably get plenty of time to rest. Maddison's going to do her best to get me fired. She said so."

"Because you went to bat for me on that threaded needle business?" asked Steve.

"That's the hook she'll hang it on, I suppose," assented Julie.

"It helped me a great deal," Steve said, "and I'm grateful to you, Julie. I'll get up a petition among the doctors tomorrow and take it to the director myself. The operating room would go to pot without you."

"Oh, no," protested Julie, but she sounded pleased.

The front door of the hospital opened. From the patch of darkness where they stood they looked to see who was coming out. It was the operating room supervisor. Her head was arrogantly high; from her rigid shoulders hung a long blue cape. With her eyes straight ahead, she marched past them towards the nurses' home. They did not move or speak until they heard her go inside.

"What does she get out of life?" Julie asked finally.

"Heaven knows," murmured Steve, "I don't."

They went on walking and presently Julie said, "About that blood, Steve. I spilled it but it wasn't carelessness. Do you want me to explain what happened?"

"Only if you want to, Julie."

"I offered to get it," she said in a low tone, "with the idea of taking my time and holding the operation off. I should have known what would happen."

"Did Vin follow you in there?" asked Steve sharply.

"Yes."

"He's been hounding you, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"This time there *will* be bones broken," said Steve in a cold, hard voice. "I warned him to let you alone, Julie."

"I know his kind," she said quickly, "it wouldn't have mattered at all if I'd heard him coming and been prepared, but I didn't. I was thinking about Cliff and about you, Steve, leaving the party when it meant so much to you. I'd taken the flask out of the bank and then all at once I felt his arms around me. I tried to get away but he laughed and held me closer and then I felt his lips——"

A shiver passed over her.

Steve took his hand from her arm and started towards the hospital.

"Steve!" she cried out. "Steve, where are you going?"

He spoke between his teeth.

"Can't you guess?"

Julie ran after him. "Please don't," she begged, catching at his arm, "I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought you would take it like that. I don't want a fight."

"My fingers are itching, Julie," he said harshly.

"I know they are, but it would only make things harder for me."

"Well, if you feel that way about it," he said reluctantly.

They moved back into the darkness.

"Do you really think he intends to go south?" asked Julie presently.

"Yes."

"He hasn't a shred of conscience, has he?"

"No."

"Is the patient Mrs. Gardner?"

"Yes."

"Do you suppose he'll marry her eventually?"

"I imagine so."

"How can she hope to hold him, Steve?"

"She won't hold him, Julie, but her money will."

Julie nodded agreement.

"But what about the hospital, Steve?" she asked in a troubled voice. "If he leaves next week and you the week after how will they get along?"

"I've been thinking about that," Steve told her, "I'll stay on for a while until they can pick up a resident if they want me to."

"But that will interfere with your own plans, won't it, Steve?" she asked anxiously.

"No."

"I don't think you should sacrifice yourself," Julie said earnestly. "You've planned on getting into the Denton Clinic. It's what you want and you shouldn't let anything interfere with it."

A plane was passing overhead. He looked up, watching the red and green lights blinking on and off, and when the roar of the motors had subsided he brought his eyes back to her and said soberly, "It was you who told me the game didn't always go as planned, Julie."

She stood motionless, her hands in the pockets of her coat

"I remember. It was on our first ride to Maine."

"Yes," he said, "the day we discovered how much we had in common." He moved slightly and stared towards the dark patch of woods near the hospital. He thought he could hear the brook singing softly to itself. "I asked you if you knew why the game didn't always go as planned," he went on, "and you said no, but that you were working on it. Have you come to any conclusion yet, Julie?"

"No," she said, and then, taking a step towards him, "Steve, have your plans changed?"

He laughed. "Yes, but don't sound so alarmed about it."

"Then please explain," she said impatiently, "I'm all at sea."
"Don't be cross, Julie."

He had thought it was going to be easy to tell her what was in his mind. He had imagined the words bubbling forth with no difficulty at all, but now that they were alone in the dark and the time was ripe for speaking, he found he did not know how to begin. The thought of Owen had intruded. Julie had been seeing Owen on her trips to Maine. How did she feel about him?

"I'm not angry, Steve," Julie was speaking in a gentle tone, "but time is passing and you stand here talking when you should be on your way back to the party."

"Do you want me to go back?" he asked.

"Leslie's waiting for you, Steve."

"No, she isn't, Julie," he said quietly, "everything's over between us. She made that plain before I left."

Julie drew her breath in sharply.

"I spoiled it for you when I telephoned, didn't I?"

"No."

"Oh, I did," she cried in a tone of distress, "I was afraid something like that might happen and I like Leslie. I like her so much, Steve. She was so kind to me and to Neil. We were friends and now—"

Her voice broke. She seemed unable to go on. Steve took her hands in his and held them. He would never tell her what Leslie had said, he decided, he would not let Julie know that Leslie hadn't considered them friends, that she'd only been superficially kind that day in Maine.

"And now life starts, Julie," he said, tightening the pressure of his hands on hers.

She pulled her hands from his, thrusting them into her pockets again as she said, "She'll forgive you. She'll forgive you, Steve."

"Suppose I don't want to be forgiven?"

"But you do. You must!"

He shook his head. "It's all over, I tell you. Leslie and I have parted for good." He took a package of cigarettes from his pocket and offered it to Julie. She shook her head. He lit one and went on talking. "It was stay there and go back on Cliff, or

walk out on Leslie and the clinic and stand by the kid. She made that very clear."

"And you felt it your duty to come back here," said Julie flatly.

"I don't want to pose as being noble, Julie." He had the burned match between his fingers and he broke it slowly, letting the pieces fall to the ground. "I did what I wanted to do most. It seemed at first as if I was throwing a lot away, but up there in the operating room with Cliff depending on me and you risking your job to help me, Julie, I knew I wasn't. I felt *right*, if you know what I mean, and I've felt that way about it ever since."

He paused and put his hand out to touch Julie but she stepped back, asking very low, "What's Leslie going to do?"

"Marry Richard Kane and live happily ever after. I was just an interlude, apparently, and I'm glad we've found it out. Kane's been in love with her for years and they suit each other admirably." He paused, took a few steps and leaned his back against a tree. "I placed her in a difficult position tonight and I regret that. Her friends are also her critics, but Leslie's the smartest one in her crowd. She'll carry it off."

The rough bark of the tree felt like a strong supporting arm against his tired back.

"I'll write her a note of apology tonight," he said, "and also one to Dr. Denton."

Neither of them spoke for several minutes, then out of the dark Julie asked, "What are your plans for Cliff?"

He could hear the compassion throbbing in her voice.

"When he's well enough to leave the hospital I'm going to send him to my mother. She likes boys. She knows how to handle them."

"Neil could help," said Julie eagerly.

Steve nodded. "I was counting on Neil."

He saw Julie shiver.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

He straightened up. "Let me feel your hands."

"I'm all right," she said, but when she put her hands in his he

found that they were icy. He chafed them gently, as he had that day in Maine. "Are you bored with me, Julie?"

"How can you ask such a thing!"

"You wouldn't rather have Owen holding your hands?"

"Owen?"

There was no mistaking the amazement in her voice.

"All right, all right," he muttered, feeling light-headed with relief, "is it a crime to ask?"

"You talk such nonsense sometimes," she said.

He laughed and drew her closer to him.

"Look up at the sky, Julie. Isn't it vast and mysterious? Listen to the wind. Do you know what it's saying? Feel the earth beneath our feet, hard and unyielding now, but ready to burst forth and give life when the time comes. What's the answer to it all?"

He could hear her breathing and he listened for a moment, then drawing her to him so that his arm was around her waist and her head against his shoulder, he went on.

"We don't know. Nobody knows. We can only guess and one guess is as good as another but I have a theory. Why doesn't the great invisible force that governs nature govern man as well?"

"Perhaps it does," she murmured.

His hand was on her hair, stroking it gently back from her forehead.

"We make our plans," he went on, "and suddenly, without our volition, they're changed for us. We find ourselves moving in an entirely different direction from the one we started in. It happened to Neil. It's happened to me, and to millions of other people. I've suddenly come to believe that we don't shape life to suit our ends. Life shapes us to fill the place we are intended to fill."

"I like that idea, Steve," Julie murmured.

"I must try it out on Owen," he said, with a little laugh.

"Will you be sharing an office with Owen?" she asked.

"Yes." He laughed again. "More plans."

"You're headed in the right direction now," Julie declared in a tone of satisfaction.

"Julie . . .") His voice failed him suddenly.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Will you come along, Julie? Will you marry me? It won't be an easy life. I'll be starting from scratch and it may be years before I get anywhere. I'll have to be chained to the telephone and work like the very deuce. I'll be on the heights one day and in the depths the next. It'll be a struggle to get patients, a struggle to make a living——"

"Hush, Steve." He felt her fingers on his lips. She was turning towards him. He reached out and gathered her into his arms. "I love you so. I love you so," she murmured brokenly.

Their lips met, emotion and the darkness making them feel in a world by themselves.

When at last they drew apart, he said, "I'll still be a five o'clock surgeon, sweetheart, but it will be a.m. instead of p.m."

She said in a somewhat shaken voice, "You might like to know that I make my best coffee early in the morning."

He enfolded her in his arms again.

He bent his head and found her lips. A cool white moon, incredibly lovely, was rising around them and as they stood embracing he felt lifted up and once more conscious of his soul in union with some mighty force beyond ordinary comprehension.